The **future** of **electronic entertainment** issue#1

EDGE®

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Previewed: World of Warcraft, Pariah, GTA: San Andreas, Oddworld: Stranger, Red Ninja
Reviewed: Fable, Burnout 3, Doom 3, The Sims 2, Gradius V,
Interviewed: Epic on Unreal 3 and the future of PC actioners
Plus: EA/Criterion – a special report; Gizmondo handheld

October 2004 $8.95 Australia



The Second Coming... Halo 2
Bungie aims for eleven out of ten

Unreal Engine 3.0 An Epic view of the future of game development
Gradius V Everyone's going retrosexual – why aren't you?
An Audience With The King Michael Ephraim on top of the console world
World of Warcraft Can Blizzard forge massively multiplayer for the mass market

WHO YOU ARE IS NOT ALWAYS...

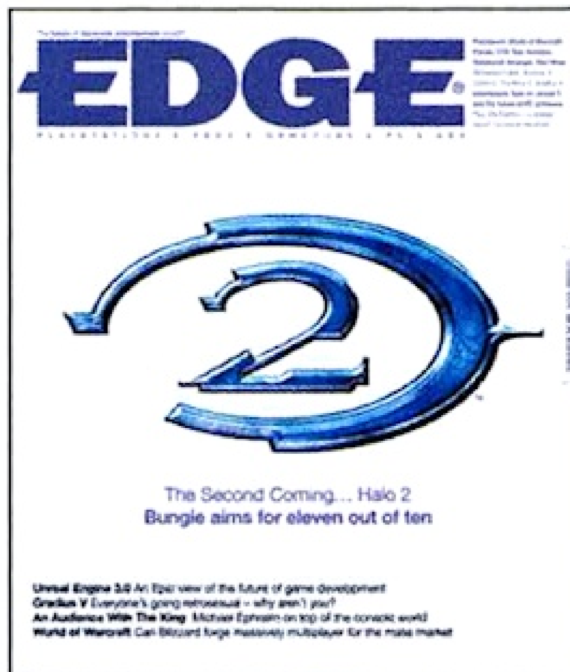


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WHO YOU WILL BECOME.



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I recall as I sat down for my second interview at my first gig in the industry that I was asked which gaming magazines I liked, and I only one name came to mind… "Edge." It was the only magazine I'd seen that was clearly thinking about the future rather than just waiting for the industry to make its announcements. But why did that matter to me?

I started gaming with Pong, though that doesn't make me special – loads of people did. Of course you don't need to have been gaming so many years to have gotten around to giving your favourite hobby some more thought.

We as gamers are now well and truly aware of the fact that once you play a lot of games, you can see the patterns. If you look at the whole spectrum, stark originality is essentially considered a risk because the formulas work, and gaming is now too big a business for many to take risks.

History repeats though, and for any one system manufacturer or development house to truly break from the pack and be the one that engineers the beginning of a new way of gaming – it won't be one using the formula.

Some wise venerable-type would probably say that constantly looking to the horizon for something better denies gamers the chance to enjoy something within their grasp, and much of Edge will be devoted to the now and nearer future of gaming across all platforms.

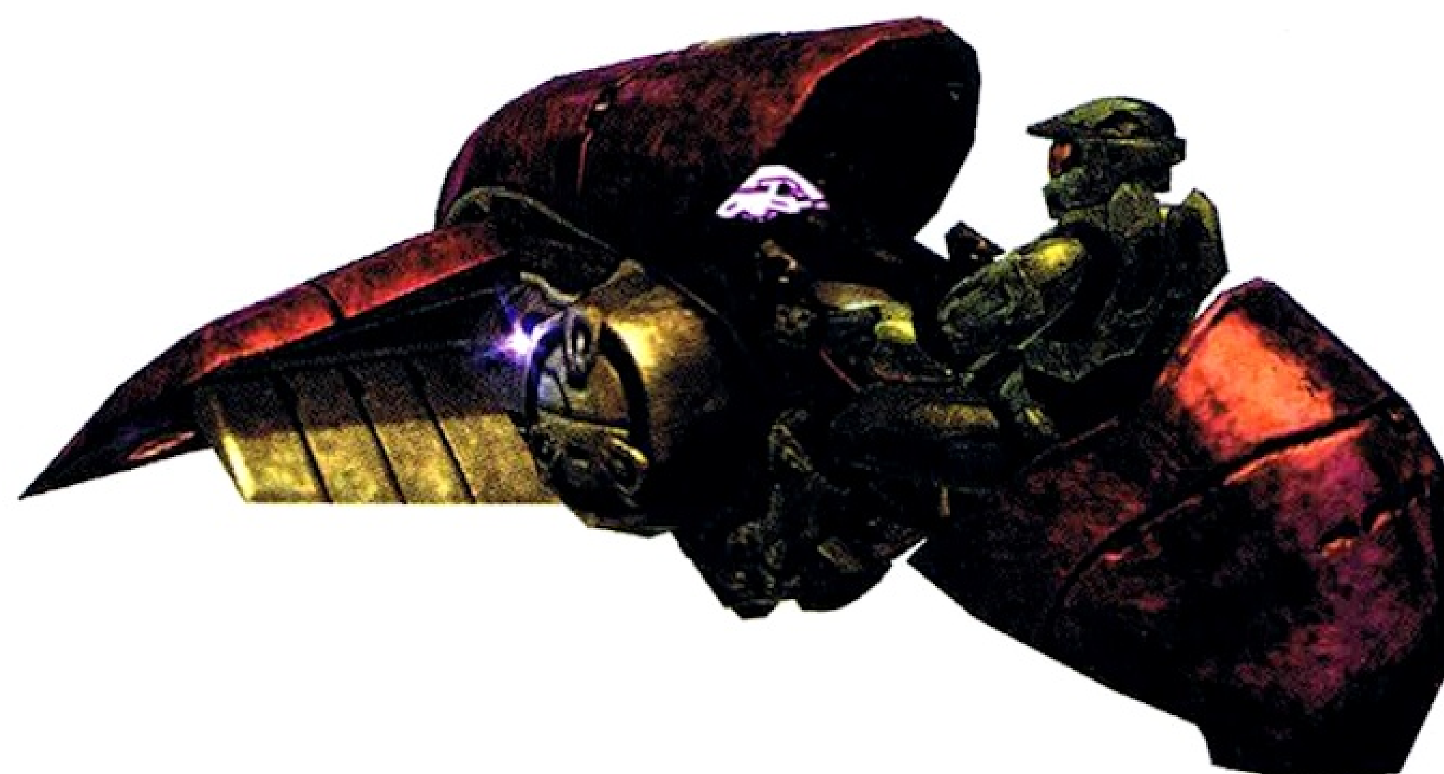
Speaking of things close at hand, this new Australian edition of Edge will offer more insight into our local industry, one that is at last starting to draw attention from abroad on a regular basis.

The Edge mission statement?

To introduce you to the gaming industry's key players, to help you find and grasp the creative boundaries and possibilities of gaming today, and to brace you for what lies tomorrow….

Welcome to the cutting Edge Australia,





Features













EDGE

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the 'have morph fun' issue

030







Prescreen











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Testscreen

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"No, I won't hurt her. I'll blow her head off!"


EA
Criterion
UBISOFT
ATARI
ACTIVISION
KONAMI

Has EA become too big to play?

With its takeover of Criterion, EA has become more than just the most dominant game publisher in the world: it has outgrown the entire industry. So what happens now?



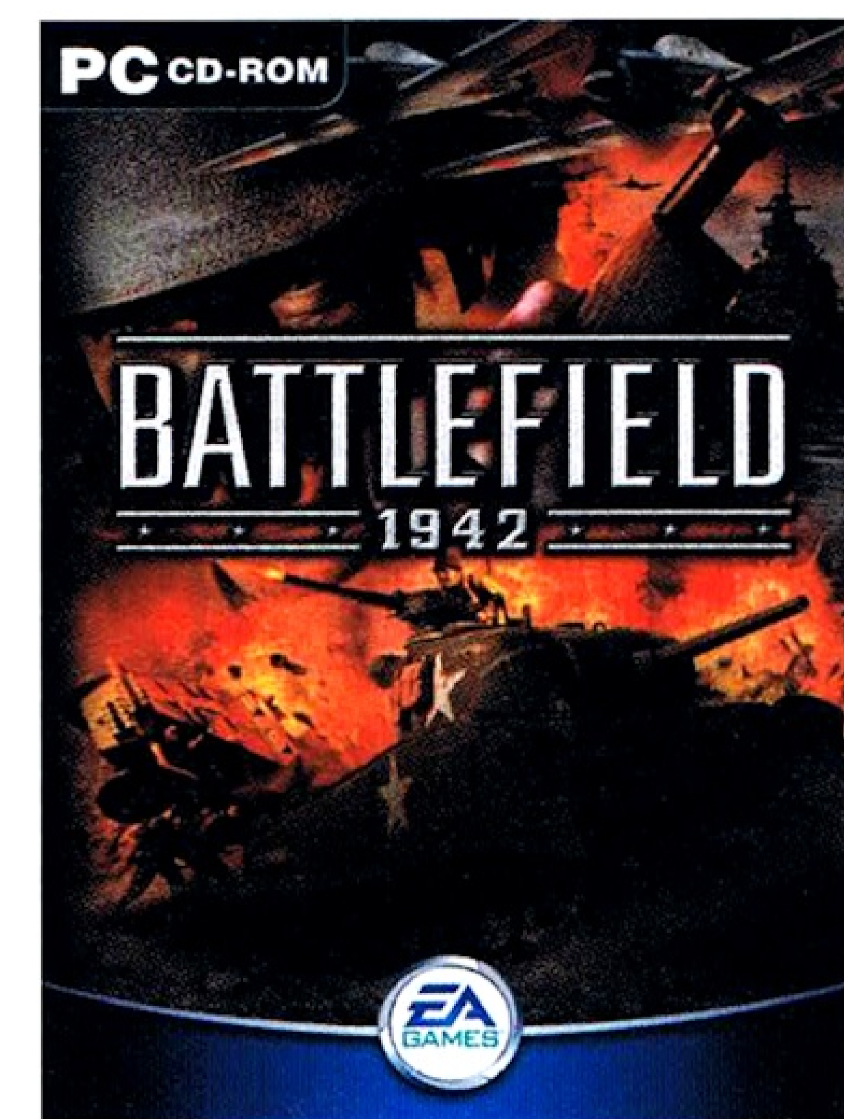
David Lau-Kee has reason to smile. Already reaping Criterion's rewards, the new EA deal is unlikely to have made him any poorer

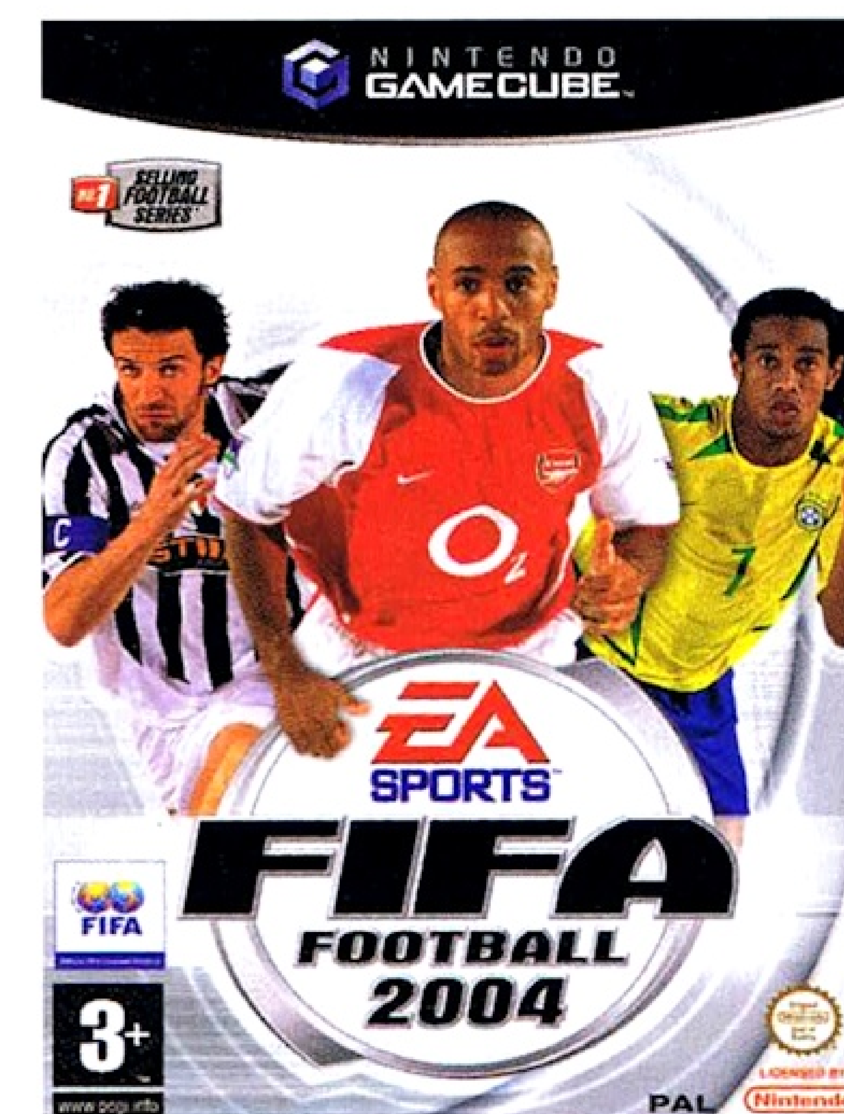
In some ways, it's hard to explain the significance of EA's acquisition of UK developer and middleware provider Criterion. The headline 'Large publisher buys partner studio' – Criterion's racer *Burnout 3* is one of EA's big hopes for the spring – is not an exciting prospect. But for those of a strategic bent, the importance of the deal boils down to RenderWare, Criterion's suite of game development tools.

Yet this isn't a deal about EA's acceptance of middleware. The publisher's various studios have used RenderWare on key sport brands, such as *Madden NFL Football*, in the past. It's not even a deal about the boost the highly optimised RenderWare 4 can provide EA with respect to next-generation games consoles. Instead, the crux of the matter is much broader. Like a skilled player of the Japanese game go, in which the spaces matter rather than the counters, EA's move for Criterion isn't about the move itself, it's about the consequence of the move for other players. Or, put another way, the deal isn't about what Criterion can do for EA, but what Criterion can't now do for the rest of the videogame industry.

At least that's the perception among many. With RenderWare locked into the development pipeline of some hugely profitable franchises such as Rockstar's *GTA*, Activision's *Tony Hawk's* skating games and Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer*, the problem for publishers is that these titles are now dependent on intellectual property owned by their biggest rival. In a sense, their ongoing success is now dependent on EA's largesse.

> "Now I have the freedom to plunder from the EA store of tools and libraries to add to RenderWare, the middleware playing field remains level"





EA enjoys massive success in the online and sports spaces – and it's combining the two

The fightback starts here

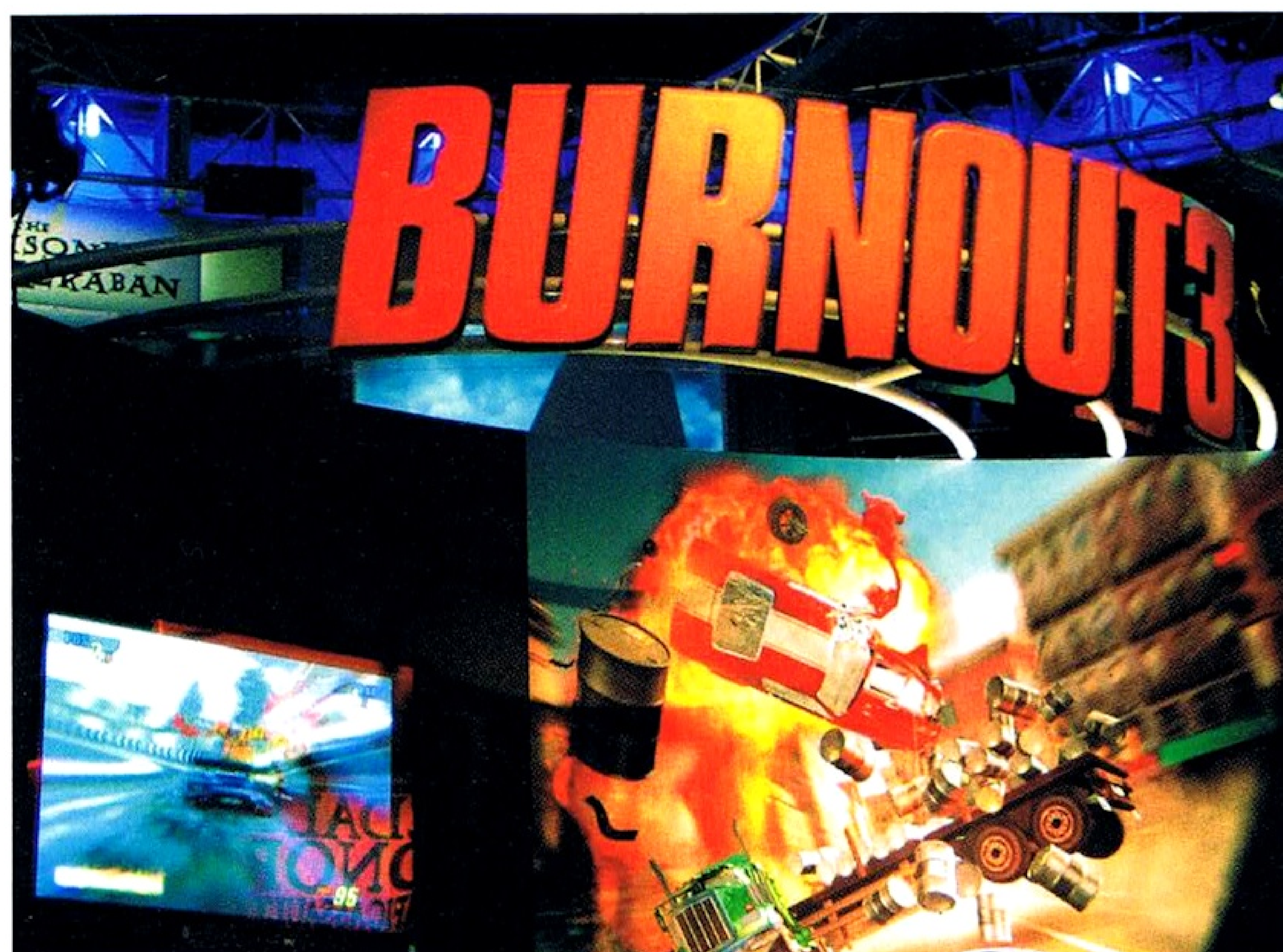
It's an assertion Criterion's CEO **David Lau-Kee** totally rejects. "There's no way I would have entertained the deal if it would have substantially changed our goals," he says. "We always have, and we always will, provide precisely the same technology internally as we provide externally. That won't change because we are part of EA. In fact, now I have the freedom to plunder from the EA store of tools and libraries to add to RenderWare, the middleware playing field remains level."

Bruce McMillan, EA's executive vice president and group studio head, is also firm in allaying conspiracy theorists. "Criterion's middleware is used in roughly 25 per cent of all games in development," he says. "I believe, in future, the combination of EA's tools and RenderWare will be a compelling solution for other developers, and they'll want continued access."

Handled in the right way, it's true that RenderWare backed by EA's production experience could further accelerate the acceptance of middleware. Certainly EA is looking to increase its own reliance. "Buying Criterion fits our core strategy for aligning our worldwide studio operation behind a common technology framework," McMillan says, explaining one of the reasons behind the acquisition.

And perhaps this is the real significance of the deal. Other publishers have placed similar faith in RenderWare – Infogrames being a particularly enthusiastic user across its European and US operations, for example. But only EA seems to possess the strategic vision to look beyond the obvious benefits. Taking it at its word, by owning Criterion it can make RenderWare better, improve its internal efficiencies and generate cashflow by licensing the results to other companies.

For Lau-Kee, it was this leadership attitude that proved to be the dealmaker. "The nature of a company such as Criterion means we've received almost continual offers," he reveals. "Having worked closely



The success of EA's involvement with *Burnout 3* is revealed on page 90. While some may mourn the introduction of a brash American vocabulary, it's almost certain to outsell its predecessors

The Madden method

Celebrating its 15th anniversary, *Madden NFL Football* is a classic case study of the EA mentality at work. First released for the Apple II in 1989, *John Madden Football* actually boasted an inauspicious start. Two years late in development, early focus testing suggested the title *Electronic Arts Football* would be more popular. However, having signed up the chief NFL coach and commentator John Madden, EA took the decision to go with its original title. There wasn't even a plan for sequel, although one was quickly concocted after early success. A new version of the game has been released every year since.

The annual refresh, in part carried out to ensure the game remained up-to-date with respect to players and teams, also had the commercial benefit of locking consumers into a year-on-year sales pattern. The inclusion of the year in each title means the current game version is clear to casual buyers as well. Interestingly, however, this marketing ploy only started in 1993 with *Madden NFL 94*, when EA first signed a deal to use the NFL licence. This also proved to be the springboard for the company to unleash its first TV ads. With total sales topping 35million units and annual sales now around the five-million mark, *Madden* proved to be the perfect testing ground for EA's dominance of the sports genre. Regular refreshes, the use of official licences, player tie-ins and TV advertising are now seen as the norm within EA Sports games as well as the competition.



with EA, it has become increasingly clear that we are thinking about solving the same problems. Because of its size, EA has to think strategically about what's going to happen in five years' time, exactly as we have to as a technology provider."

So, if you believe the noises coming from both EA and Criterion, the result is a deal that's good for EA, Criterion and the entire games industry. There is another point of view, though, that says this deal marks the point at which EA's position within the industry subtly changes. Previously just the biggest thirdparty publisher, other publishers would at least go through the motions of talking about competing with EA. Now, however, EA's dominance, combined with its own middleware solution, potentially makes it even more powerful than console manufacturers such as Sony and Microsoft.

Its refusal to publish games for Sega's Dreamcast doomed the console in the eyes of many outside Japan. Its clout was also revealed by Nintendo's decision to reduce the licence fee it requires publishers to pay in order to release GameCube titles when EA made noises about scaling back support. Instead of a typical US$7 per disc, it's believed EA's preferential rate is around the US$2 mark. EA still pays the standard rate for Xbox and PS2 disks – one reason it is often joked that EA makes more money for Sony than Sony does. The question remains: is such dominance good for the industry?



For many, EA's Harry Potter games crystalise everything they mistrust about the company – so-so titles which dominate the charts on the basis of valuable licences and extravagant marketing

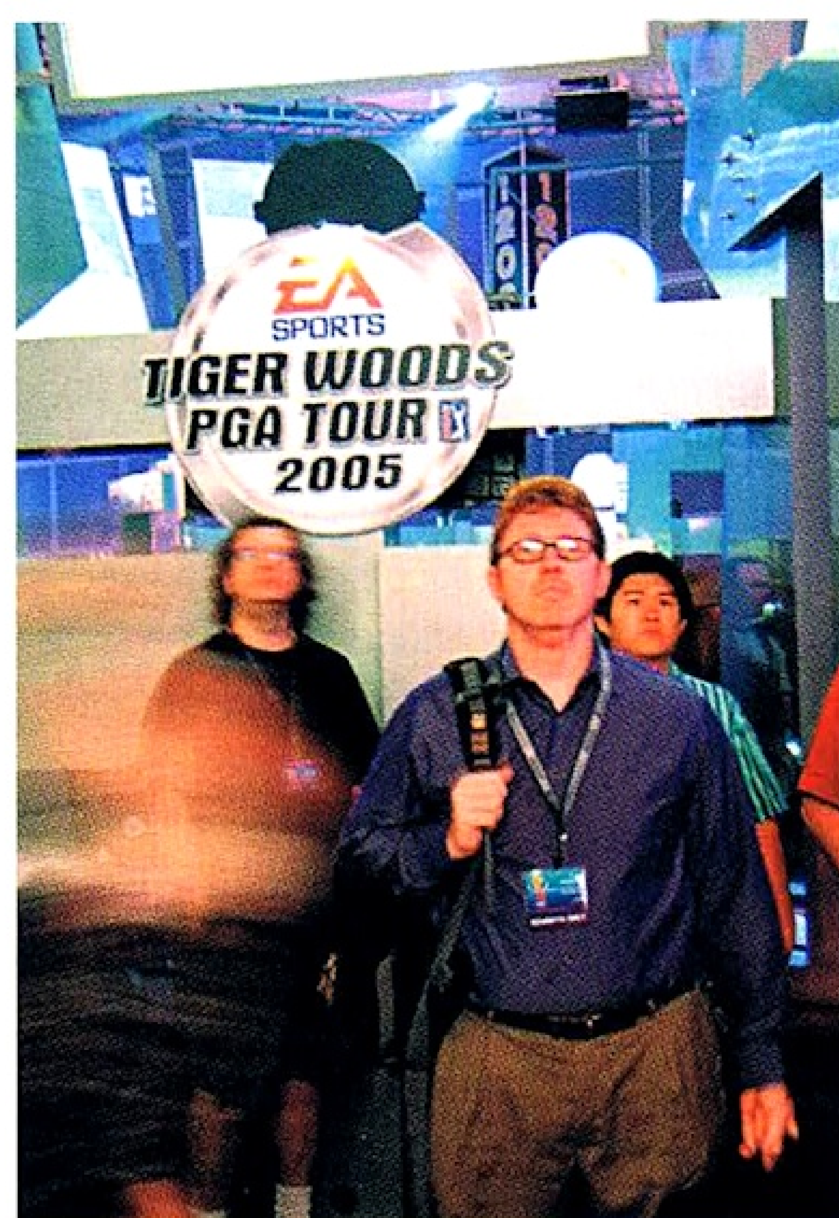
EA's rise to power

It's hard to imagine now, but EA hasn't always been the biggest and best. Back in the mid-'90s, an ambitious outfit called Acclaim ruled the roost. With revenues of over US$500 million in 1995 and game franchises such as *Mortal Kombat*, *WWF* and *NBA Jam*, it seemed unstoppable. As often happens in the industry, the wheels fell off a year later. As EA's revenue hit US$600 million, Acclaim's slumped to under US$200 million. More than just a cheap morality tale, such rollercoaster behaviour has been typical of the industry. Success has seldom been turned into long-term growth.

But while others have risen and fallen, EA has sailed through, growing almost year on year. Its trick has been a laser-like concentration on licensing and the best distribution in the business and a marketing department that doesn't confuse its customers. Amazingly, it was also the first publisher to get a handle on meeting release deadlines. According to **Bing Gordon**, the company's long-time chief marketeer, the rule of thumb is that a fixed release date will increase sales by 30 per cent. "When customers say: 'I'll buy it later', it means never," he states bluntly.

Combined with the concept of regular sequels – preferably yearly for any sports games – it has revolutionised the retail channel. And in such respects, to date, EA's success has been great for the videogame industry. It's forced other publishers to get professional and focus on issues such as meeting deadlines and having effective distribution and marketing systems.

"EA really focuses on its point-of-sale activity," says one executive in an up-and-coming publisher. "When I was last in the US, I took our office manager out to Target. I stood him ten feet from the shelf and asked him to point out the games that stood out. Every single game he pointed out was either EA Games or EA Sports, with the exception of *Vice City*."





To many, the *Tiger Woods* series is now another must-have yearly update in the EA Sports roster. Meanwhile, EA Games has extended its licence to work with Bond properties until the year 2010

EA in charge

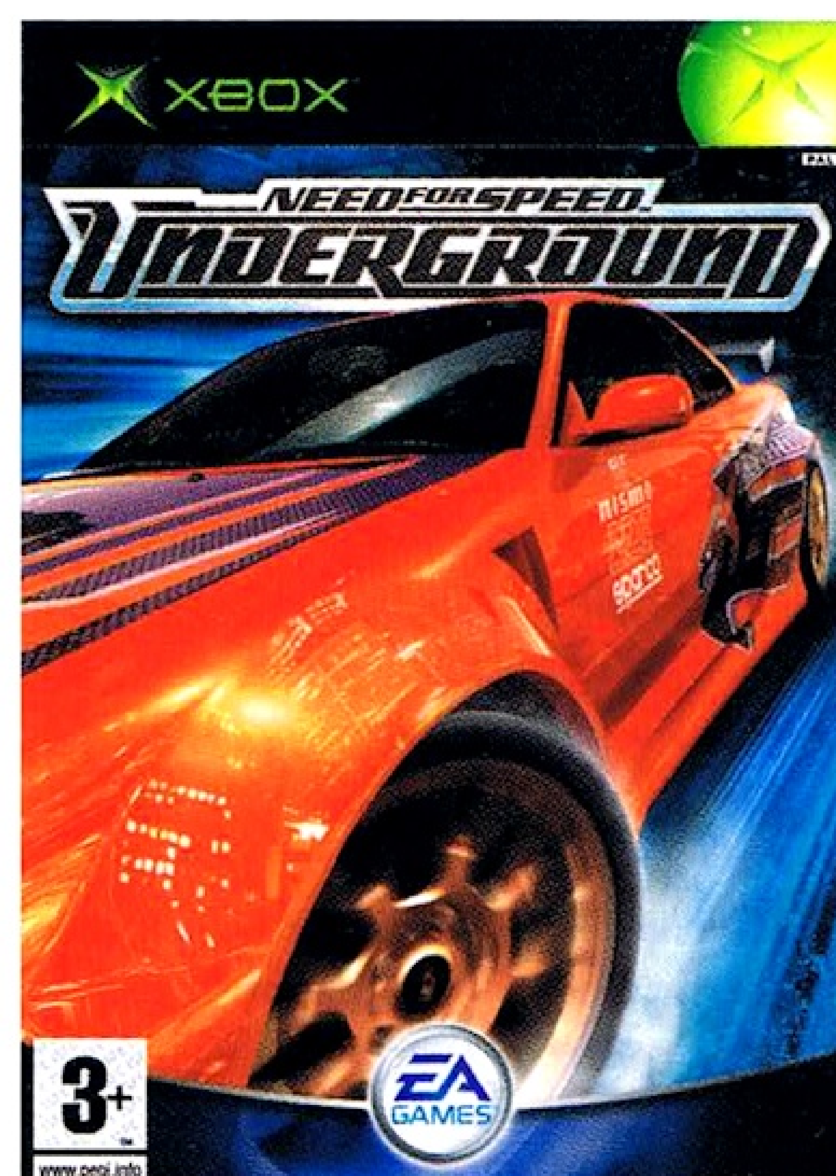
One lesson EA brought into play was the value of celebrity branding. Its first chart-topping game was *Chuck Yeager Flight Trainer*. It's built the *Madden* brand of American football games into the most successful US franchise ever (see 'The Madden method') and applied the lessons learned from that game's 15 successive yearly releases to build EA Sports into the dominant brand – the label is said to own over two thirds of the entire sport-based games market.

It's this sort of monopoly position that worries people. Such is EA's stranglehold on the sports genre that no other companies can compete. Even Microsoft and Sony have decided to drop their football, basketball and hockey releases this year, leaving only Sega's ESPN-licensed games. Interestingly, Sega's NFL game, outsold last year ten to one by *Madden*, has been released at budget price point. And the squeeze is spreading. In the racing genre, EA blasted into the top spot in 2003 thanks









It may maximise the potential of brands like LOTR and Def Jam, but EA's own IPs, such as *The Sims* and *NFS*, sell many more copies

to the five-million-plus success of *Need For Speed: Underground*. This year's sequel, combined with the potential of *Burnout 3* – a franchise made a success by Acclaim before EA muscled onto the scene, let's not forget – is already setting alarm bells ringing. Even titles that would have been previously unassailable such as *Gran Turismo 4* are under pressure, let alone ones such as Acclaim's *Juiced* and Eidos' *Crash 'n' Burn*.

The result has been a move to extremes, notably the sort of mature games from which EA has traditionally shied away. One proponent is Midway. Previously with a core of well-respected sports games, it's now reinventing itself under the direction of ex-Playboy CEO David Zucker. Looking at the industry with a fresh set of eyes, he's stated that the company's new focus will be M-rated games, a philosophy backed up with the release of *The Suffering* and which will be extended with games such as *Narc*, *Area 51*, *Mortal Kombat*, and the *Unreal* series. Take Two's Rockstar label, behind games such as *GTA: Vice City*, *State Of Emergency* and *Manhunt*, was set up for much the same reasons.

A more subtle result of this attitude will be seen during the second half of the year. Because of production issues, blockbusters such as *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, *Halo 2*, *Metroid Prime 2* and *Killzone*, none of which are from EA, are competing with each other within the FPS genre, as well as trying not to be pushed out by *GTA: San Andreas*. The likely result is that few will meet sales targets.

It's perhaps in this light that the most fundamental anti-EA feeling will become evident. With notable exceptions, it doesn't make the sort of games that are listed in critics' top 100s of all time. For all the money EA's made from the James Bond licence – a deal now extended to 2010 – it's never made one to touch Rare's *GoldenEye*. Sports purists still prefer Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer* to *FIFA*, despite the nonsense of not-quite-correct player names. Its biggest games of the last few years have been based on the IP of other industries – The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter – while *Medal of Honor* is Saving Private Ryan by another name.

> "If the whole industry gets bigger and becomes much more profitable, EA as the biggest player just gets a larger slice of a much bigger pie"

Yet, if Lau-Kee is to be believed, the bigger EA gets, the better it will be for the entire industry in the long run. "I've been surprised about how frank the senior EA guys are about their desire to make this a healthy industry for everyone," he says. "I almost hesitate to say it, but I think it makes sense to EA from an almost altruistic perspective. If the whole industry gets bigger and becomes much more profitable, EA as the biggest player just gets a larger slice of a much bigger pie."

In that respect, at least, the Criterion deal marks a point of change. Already too dominant in some ways, the effort EA puts into developing RenderWare and the openness with which it shares that knowledge will be closely watched. Competition is good, but the real deal now for EA is to look for opportunities outside the videogame industry.

As one of Xbox's creators, Seamus Blackley, has pointed out, unless publishers can create their own IP and outsource it to other media sectors, gaming will remain a secondary creative industry. Now would seem to be a good time for EA to accept the challenge.

EA: an accountant's dream

Even in the hyperbole of the gaming industry, EA's financial muscle is incredible. The first company to break the US$1billion revenue barrier in the financial year ending 1999, the US$2billion barrier followed in 2003. It missed the US$3billion barrier in 2004 – a year in which it released 32 games, 27 of which sold over a million copies – by US$43million. Compared to its nearest rival, Take Two, that's almost three times as large. Whereas in terms of its stock market capitalisation, a better indication of how moneymen view future prospects, its US$14.5billion worth is ten times Take Two's valuation. But the really scary thing is its profitability. There's an oft-told story that EA makes more profit in its Christmas quarter than the rest of the industry makes in the rest of the year. Not quite true, but it usually does make more profit per year than the rest of the US and European publishers combined. In 2004, for example, it made US$577million profit, compared to a combined total of Activision, Take Two and THQ of US$212million. And the gap between it and its rivals is growing. Taking into account Take Two's dramatic rise on the back of *GTA: Vice City*, EA still managed to increase the ratio between its annual profits and that of its nearest competitor (which used to be Activision but is now Take Two). Unsurprisingly, it has more cash in the bank than it perhaps knows what to do with: US$2.4billion at the last count.



Innovations like EA Trax, as featured in *SSX*, have bolstered EA's financial position and attracted the attention of the music industry

An audience with the King...

We speak to Michael Ephraim, Managing Director of Sony Computer Entertainment Australia on the state of play for the console industry leader

Michael Ephraim has been Managing Director of SCEA ever since the PlayStation burst on to the Australian console scene, all to speculation by the gaming stalwarts that Sony would struggle to compete with veterans Sega and Nintendo.

Now Sega are a third party publisher making games for Sony systems, and after having been effectively trounced in the console market, Nintendo are facing the reality of seeing Sony take a slice of their 'portable' pie.

Having 'Gotten it right twice', we asked Mr. Ephraim the situation for PS2 today.

"We're still positioned extremely well. Globally we're market leader by a long way, we have over 85 million PlayStation 2's sold and we have our nearest competitor at about 16 million. In Australia we also have a massive lead of about 1.35 million versus just under 600,000, and these are GFK figures," declared Ephraim before continuing, "the exciting thing about the current situation is that we are consistently delivering content and innovation that is appealing to a broader and varied customer base, where we feel our competitors are releasing the same old types of games. What I mean by this is things like *EyeToy*, which in Australia has sold over 170,000 units, and *SingStar* has now sold over 65,000 units, and those are very different types of games that have appealed to a broader market. We hate to call it 'Some kind of Karaoke type of thing' but we know by means of registration that *SingStar* has opened up the market to females in a major way – older females, younger females," explains Ephraim.



Having dominated the console market for years, Sony take on the portable gaming device monopoly of Nintendo, although with PSP's media features, is it really the same market?

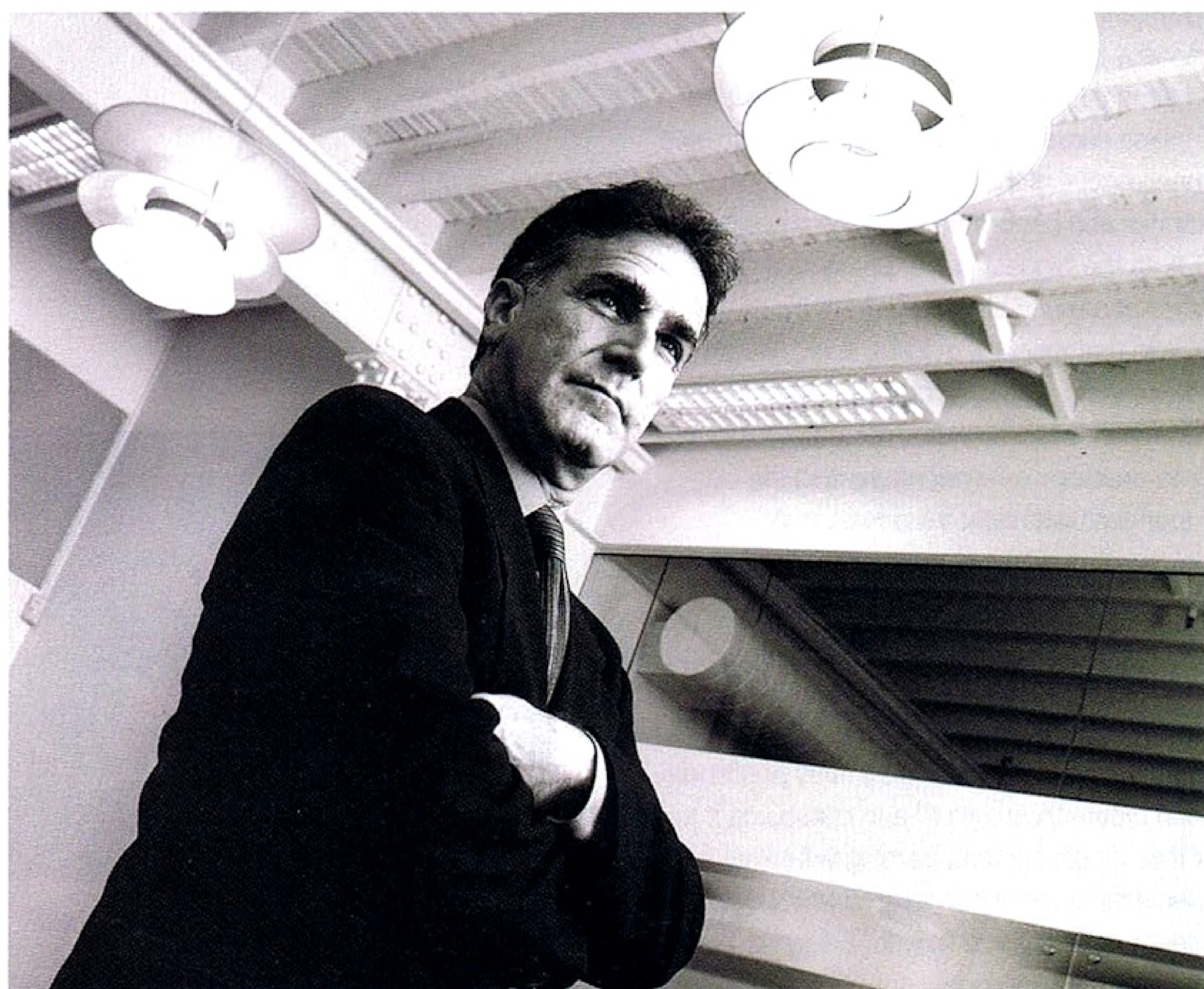
Being 'femme-friendly' clearly makes a huge difference – just ask EA. With that being an obvious market to target eventually, what have Sony really learned from the PS2?

"We all know that online gaming and online connectivity to a console is something in the future that will play a big role for this category. But at the moment it's really positioning itself for the future. We have sold now close to 12,000 network adaptors in Australia, so there're about 12,000 people online out of a 1.35 million install base. Our competitors probably say about the same, so no matter how much noise we've made about online, it's only appealing to a niche market right now, but clearly it will play a bigger role with our businesses in the future," said Ephraim, who then went on to reveal the key factor for SCEA's success with the PS2, stating,

"PlayStation2 also taught us a lot of things about having a multimedia device, being the first music, movies and games machine. We've really learned about market trends, consumer behaviour, like purchasing the different categories of software, and stepped away from the 'Johnny's bedroom gaming device' that we think PlayStation maybe was, where PlayStation 2 can sit very comfortably in the lounge room or a family home entertainment system."

Before getting carried away and moving on to PSP, he reminded us we're now in the mid-phase of the PS2's life cycle, announcing, "Our targets are showing that we have only sold about 50% of the PlayStation 2 consoles that we will by the times we're done," voiced Ephraim. Easy to believe given the PSX story, and Ephraim was keen to highlight that time wasn't hurting the PS2 one bit in terms of software evolution.

"The graphics on *V8 Supercars 2* show that the PlayStation 2 can be squeezed for more power in development, because if you look at this game on PlayStation 2, it puts to bed the myth that our competitor has a 'better system on specs' but graphics-wise, we feel the system is still improving," And



"We don't feel that we'll be competing directly with Nintendo because PSP will once again be another multimedia device..."

Edge feel there's room for debate there, the masses speak with their wallet. They clearly don't see, or react, to the difference (if any).

"Really, where we go from here is to really stay where we are – keep pushing more PlayStation 2s into homes, and then our next big move is PlayStation Portable."

Taking on a new market is a tough ask, but Ephraim certainly doesn't sound nervous about moving into one, explaining, "We don't feel we'll be competing directly with Nintendo because PSP will once again be another multimedia device that will offer the consumers a lot of choice with different forms of content and entertainment."

Whether or not Sony can woo gaming consumers into adopting all the formats to work with PSP remains to be seen, but Sony clearly feel they have all in place

"We have a lot of work to bring the product to market, but we're confident that when it does hit the street, people will be very excited about the entertainment. I also think there'll be some surprised in store for what sort of functionality it will be able to do because of the USB port compatability," noted Ephraim.

Apparently ready for anything, then, we asked Ephraim what it was that the gaming industry can deliver that the masses simply aren't ready for. He wasted no time in responding, "You know, online gaming jumps right to the top of my head, to be honest. We've spent over two million dollars to launch online gaming, and to capture 12,000 people isn't bad, but that's out of a 1.35 million install base, so I don't know if the 'mass' public is ready for that."

Ephraim continued on a brighter note, admitting, "Internet penetration is improving right now at an amazing rate. We've seen the J-curve happening with the installations of broadband. We feel online gaming on PlayStation has been a catalyst to start educating the consumers that broadband is for the home, but not just for the PC."

He finished, "We're in uncharted waters and I think we as an industry leader have to bear the weight of investing initially, more as an educational tool for consumers, and building the bridge and reaping the rewards over the next few years."

We suspect they'll reap them for longer than that…



Gizmondo bets all on convergence

Having let Nintendo soften up the mobile market, Tiger Telematics reveals the final form, price and release schedule of its handheld



Other than a decade's head start and a brand name to kill for, the Game Boy always had one thing going for it: simplicity. By contrast, the new generation of handhelds are all convinced convergence is the future. Manufacturer after manufacturer has stuck its finger in the mobile gaming pie and pulled out a strange fistful of plums: mp3 player, Bluetooth, touchscreen, radio.

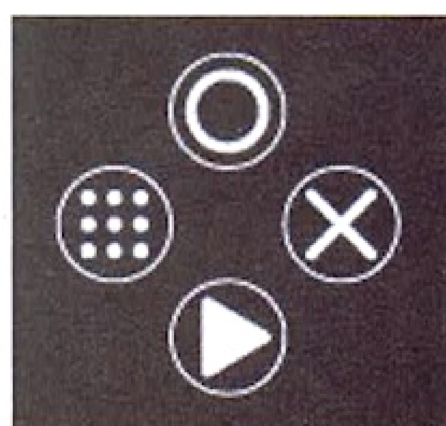
Gizmondo is a serial offender. Gaming, SMS messaging, camera, music and movie playback, GPS, Bluetooth and GPRS are part of the package, but just when you're about to sit down and christen it the perfect all-in-one you notice that it isn't a phone. So is this random box-ticking, or is there reason behind Gizmondo's largesse?

As a game device, it has some credible potential. Sensibly laid out, the face buttons, shoulder buttons and D-pad allow games to be controlled conventionally. The screen, although dwarfed by the PSP's, runs at a bright 320x240 resolution and, far more importantly, is actually finished and ready to go into customers' hands in Q4 this year overseas, and here in 2005 via Renaissance Corp. Ltd, an Auckland based technology distributor, at a price of US$429. As **Edge** goes to press, its maker is planning to announce a deal which will see Gizmondo supplied with Nvidia chipsets, greatly boosting the unit's 3D capabilities. Following this news, deals with four 'big-name' publishers are in the pipeline, and eight to ten high-profile titles should be revealed in the coming weeks.

Where Gizmondo marks out its own territory, however, is in Tiger Telematics' willingness to try to integrate the device's other capabilities into the mechanics of the games it hosts. Already announced is *Colors*, a gang-based FPS which will use GPS to allow you to receive alerts when opponents physically enter your turf. It has also just been confirmed that the machine will ship with a simple GPS-based game which will allow users to designate their own playing fields anywhere in the world. One tantalising illustration of the idea's potential –



Angelfish is a classic 2D shoot 'em up, which is a good indication of Tiger Telematics' willingness to exploit more old-fashioned genres which may work best on a digital D-pad



The only change still to be made to the prototype is this new, final button design





Stunt Car Extreme (above) and the Jensen Button-endorsed *Chicane* will be the first 3D driving games on Gizmondo

although it's important to stress that it's not currently being actively pursued by Gizmondo (or agreed by the FIA) – is tapping into the GPS systems of Formula One cars, relaying their live positions to your handset and allowing you to race alongside them on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

Gaming, SMS messaging, camera, music and movie playback, GPS, Bluetooth and GPRS are all part of the package, but it isn't a phone

Beyond gaming, Gizmondo has some very appealing properties. While it doesn't operate as a phone, the pre-paid SIM card it will ship with will allow users to send text and MMS messages from the handset, integrating well with the 640x480 VGA camera. While it's a peculiar notion – does anyone rely on texts heavily enough to swap their main SIM card into their Gizmondo, and will having a secondary Gizmondo phone number be more confusing than it's worth?

The GPS can be used as a tracking device, and applications can be sold that would turn the unit into a navigation system for use in cars. GPRS will also allow users to receive targeted adverts – short film clips or two-for-one offers which would send you a barcode which you could display in the relevant shop. It's an idea that will send a sickening shudder down most people's spines – a gaming device with guaranteed spam – but Tiger is adamant that only adverts which are of active benefit to the user will be accepted. Time will tell, but there's no question that building a second revenue stream into a device which risks being crushed by more established brands demonstrates a kind of realistic thinking which bodes well for its survival.

With all eyes mooning at the PSP, it's Gizmondo's multimedia applications which may well win it the most customers. Running Windows Media Player 9, using standard MMC cards for storage (as well as game software) and supporting USB for data connections, Gizmondo offers a much more plausible way of integrating mp3 collections and downloaded movie files into a gaming device. The quality of playback is perfectly watchable, and audio – whether through headphones or the onboard speaker – is clear and distinct.

The contest then comes down to battery life. Gizmondo's claims are modest, and consequently believable – three-and-a-half hours of continuous gameplaying or movie watching, 120 hours on standby.

Even with all this, it's still a tough sell. Gizmondo has a lot to explain to a market known to be sceptical and conservative. Without truly excellent, tailored software it's unlikely that it stands a chance. Tiger Telematics is the first to recognise this – confident in its product but keenly aware of its underdog status. It's this that gives the company an interesting edge.

The question then becomes one of whether it will have time to fully exploit the unique qualities of its device before the big boys turn up.

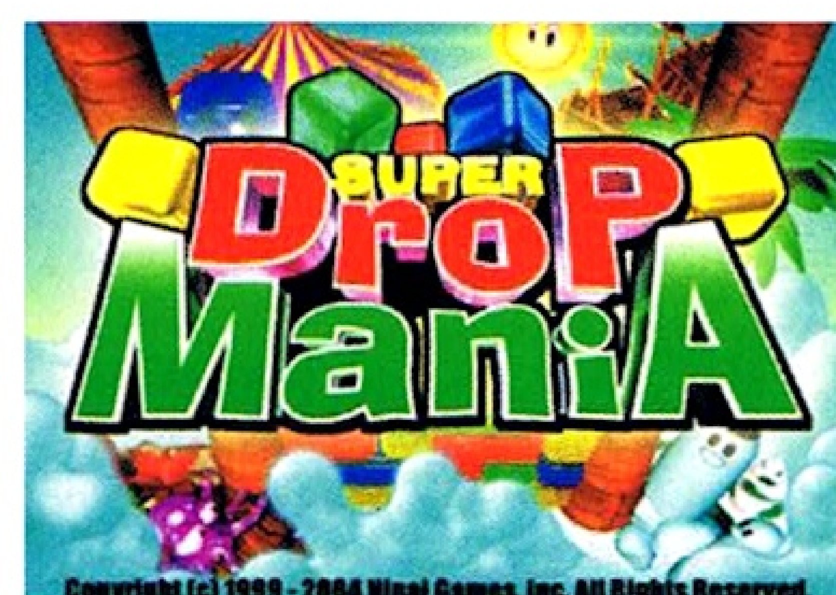








Colors, the first GPS FPS, is a high-risk game. No other genre is as unforgiving of a poor D-pad or a jogged elbow







Super Drop Mania will ship with the device. Part *Tetris*, part *Puzzle Fighter*, part *Pokemon Puzzle League*, it's yet another hybrid block game. Its time-wasting gameplay should be a perfect match for a mobile device, and will provide a good contrast to more ambitious titles

www.discreet.com

Discreet seeks to Max out

As the visuals-creation market grows ever more competitive, old hand 3D Studio gets a makeover in an attempt to show its muscle

In a world where hit games are vital for financial success, even tools companies have been jumping on the bandwagon. It's a trend that's notably impacted the companies supplying the 3D modelling and animation packages that make up the foundation of all development. Softimage's flagship for XSI remains *Half-Life 2*, while Alias uses calling cards such as *Call Of Duty* and *Gran Turismo 4* to highlight the advantages of Maya.

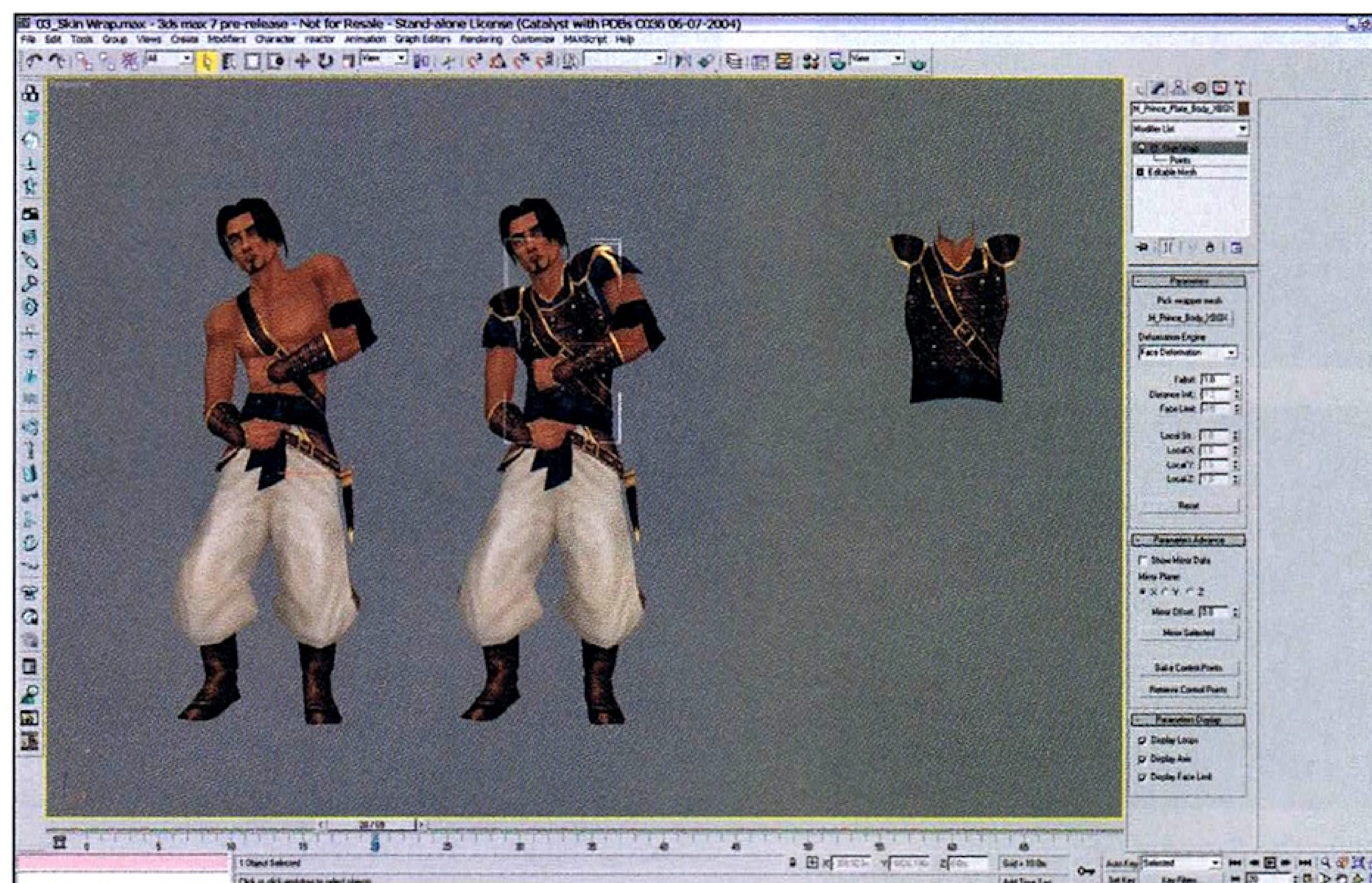
For Discreet, and its 3DS Max product, the situation has been somewhat different. It has traditionally placed less emphasis on poster children, instead focusing on the fact that it's used by the majority of game developers. Discreet claims Max is used in some form in around 80 per cent of game projects.

The announcement of its latest release demonstrates a change of policy, however. Backed by internal reorganisation, which has resulted in its non-entertainment business being merged into parent company Autodesk, Discreet is ready to come out fighting. The most striking example is the high-profile presence of assets from Ubisoft's *Prince Of Persia* sequel to illustrate some of the package's features. Previous releases had been illustrated by models created either by Discreet itself or hired-in freelance artists, so it's a mark of how seriously the company is taking the business of upping its profile. It's also a good example of what Discreet's animation product manager **Dave Campbell** says has always been one of 3DS Max's big selling points.

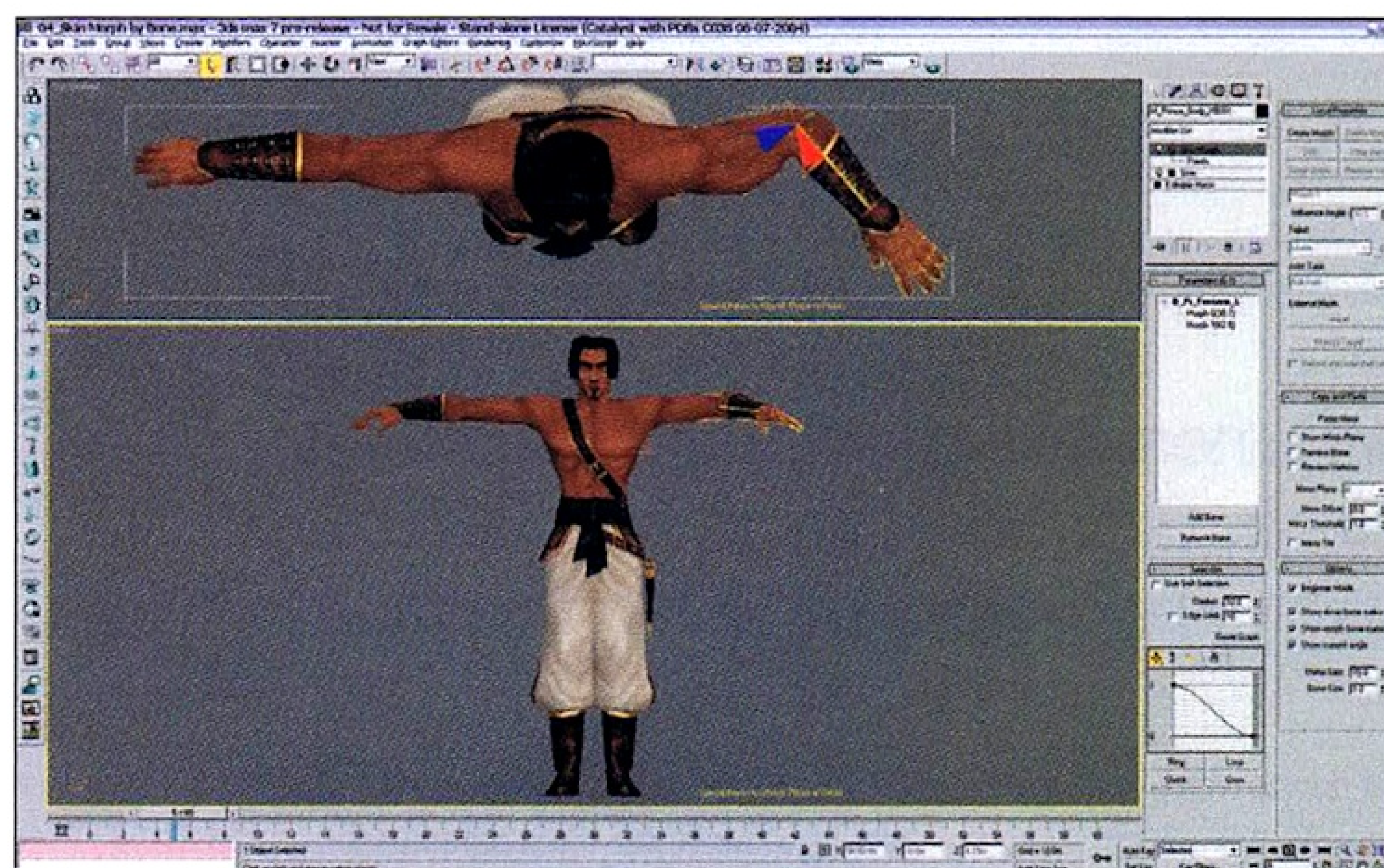
"Games is a hit-driven business: you've got to have hit games in order to stay alive. For developers this can often boil down to having a rock-solid art pipeline, particularly when it comes down to things such as sequels and reusing content," he explains. "3DS Max is a known quantity so there are lots of experienced animators and programmers, which is vital when you need to ramp up teams quickly for sequels or even revive a 3DS Max version three or version four pipeline."

Something else Discreet is keen to stress is Max's cost-effectiveness. Priced in the thousands, this is not a hobbyists toy, but Discreet are making it more accessible by making Max 7 a free upgrade for anyone who purchases Max 6. With 3DS Max 7 including a plug-in package for advanced animation that previously cost around $2,000. Things like that make a huge difference for budget-bound buyers.

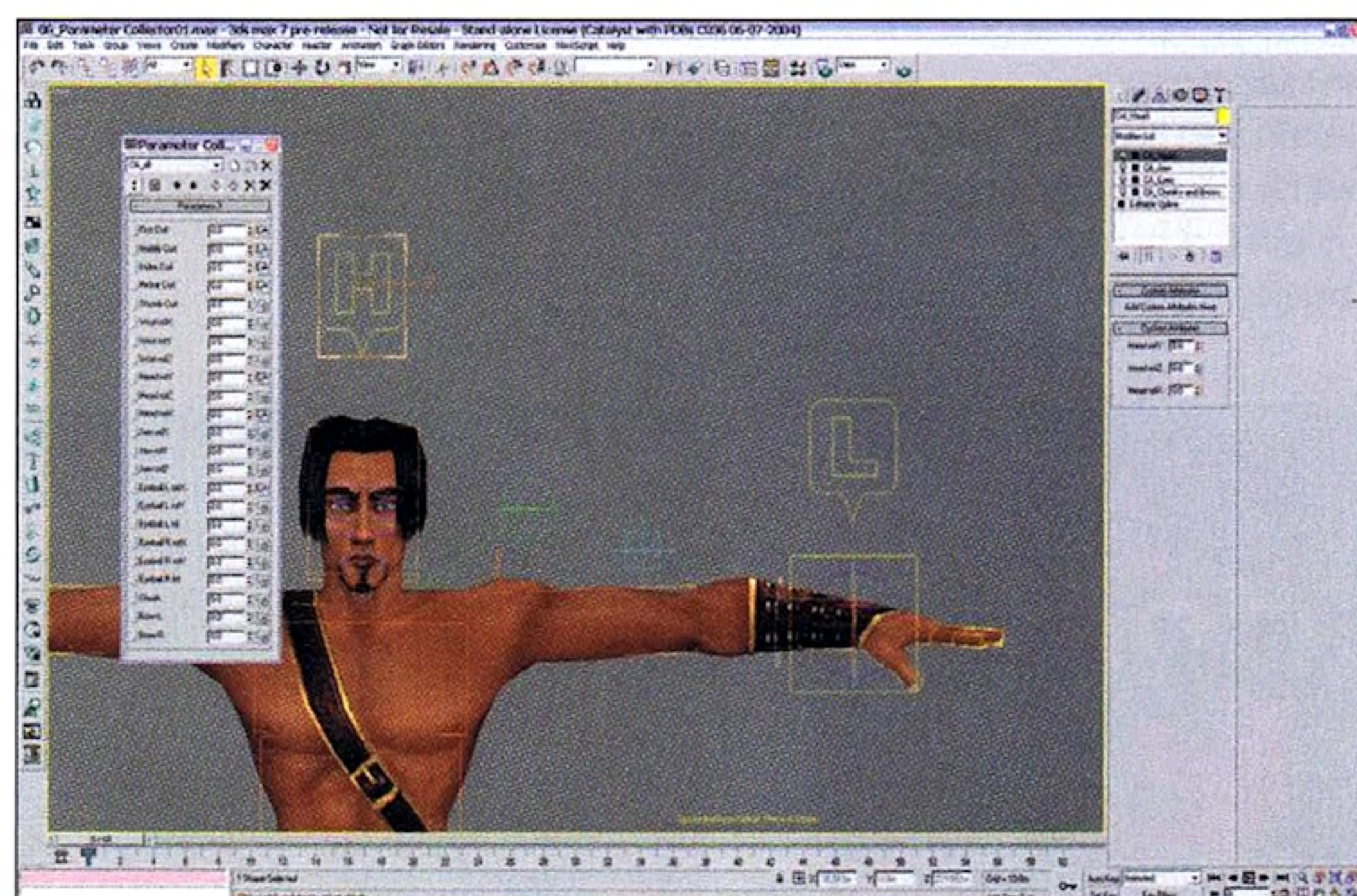
"Even though we've shortened our development cycle and tightened up our team, I think developers will find there are more production features in Max 7 than there's ever been before," Campbell reckons.



A new way of quickly equiping characters with clothes is 3DS Max 7's skin-wrap deformer, which animates objects by interpolating movement from the underlying skin, allowing the prince's threads to move naturally



One production tool in 3DS Max 7 is a skin-morphing engine which means artists can more realistically animate rotational movements, such as the elbow bend seen here



The latest version of Discreet's 3DS Max modelling and animation package demonstrates its power with the help of Ubisoft's all-new prince of Persia

What's in the box?

Corporate positioning aside, there are plenty of new features in 3DS Max 7 to excite artists and animators. A tool to generate normal maps is one key addition, which has been developed in conjunction with clients such as Epic and BioWare. Other tools include a progressive morph engine so artists can set up muscle flexing, and a skin wrap deformer, which means props and clothes can animated directly from the movement of a character's skin. Support has been added so models can be exported in the appropriate format for Sony's PSP, and a similar exporter will soon be provided for 3D Java mobile phones, too. More generally, Discreet has worked hard to ensure models and environments match their in-game look as much as possible by optimising the texture management workflow.

The right suit for the job?

www.animazoo.com

Animazoo's GypsyGyro-18 motion capture suit is so flexible, the company claims that you can even use it underwater



Animazoo's GypsyGyro-18 motion-capture suit contains 18 gyroscopes which transmit positional and rotation data wirelessly to a base station. As well as providing clean data, the system can capture multiple actors in realtime

There's nothing like a big expo to fuel a marketing department's hyperbole. And while 'multi-person motion-capture record to be broken at Siggraph' – the headline coming out of UK-based Animazoo – may not be setting the world alight, it's certainly marking the company out as one to watch in the computer animation space.

Strictly speaking, of course, it's arguable whether Animazoo's demonstration of capturing the motion of five actors simultaneously would actually be defined as a record. Films such as The Matrix series have routinely captured many more actors. The rub, however, is Animazoo's assertion that it's the first to be able to capture such motion and use it to drive CG characters in realtime, without any post-processing.

Traditionally this has always been the bugbear for users of motion capture. It's a great way to generate large amounts of animation quickly but it has always taken time, typically days, to ensure the data is clean enough to plug into a game engine, despite recent strides taken to automate the process.

This is where Animazoo thinks its novel approach pays off. While standard motion-capture systems work by defining fixed areas in which optical or magnetic systems are used to track the movement of an actor's limbs, Animazoo's latest GypsyGyro-18 suit uses 18 small gyros which are built into a lycra body suit. Each of these sends positional and rotational information at up to 125 times per second wirelessly to a base station, which can be up to 40 metres away.

The result is that the actors aren't restricted to a particular capture area. The system is quicker to set up, too, with calibration taking about ten minutes, and according to Animazoo's MD **Ali Kord**, the resulting animation data doesn't need any cleaning up.

"Getting good raw data from motion capture is a real first," he says. "If you have to clean up data after a motion-capture session, it's easy to end up destroying the subtle nuances. That's why we say if you're cleaning data, you're killing data."

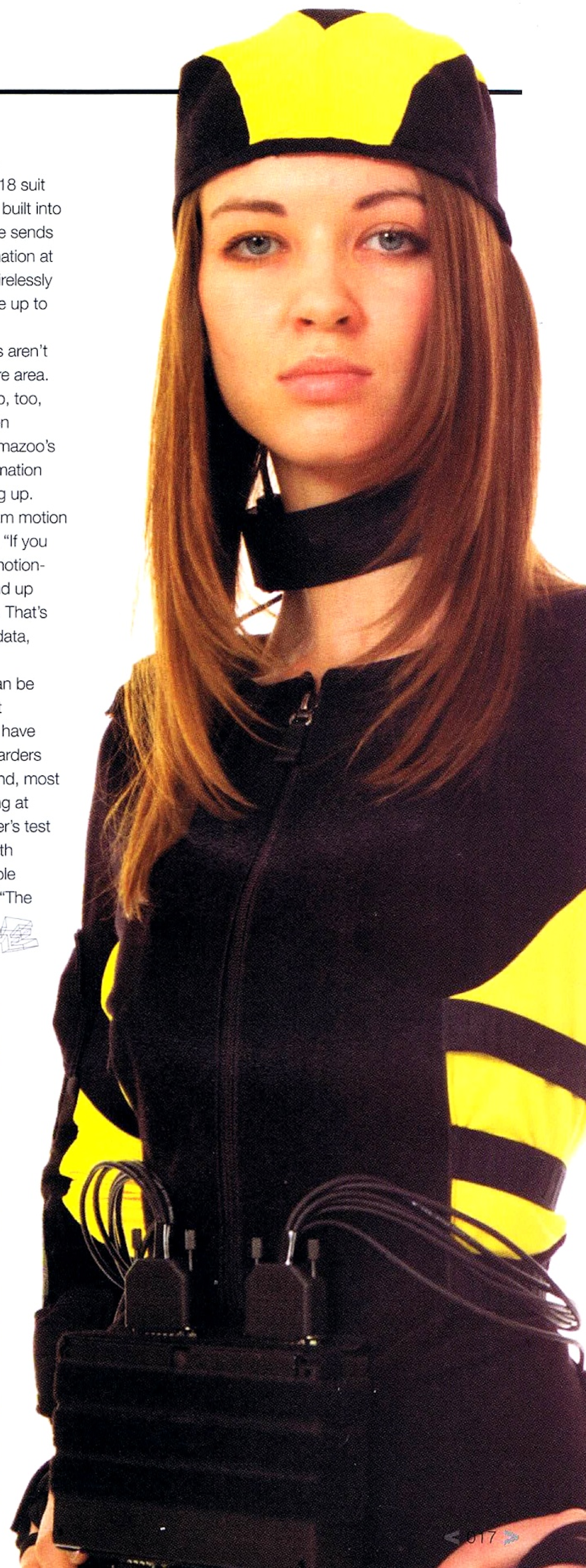
A corollary is that actors can be recorded doing more specialist activities. Animazoo's systems have been used to capture skateboarders performing in an open arena and, most recently, a motorcyclist travelling at 100mph around a manufacturer's test track. Kord also boasts that with GypsyGyro-18, capturing people swimming is now a possibility. "The only limitation for this suit is your imagination," he claims.





Capturing new markets

As well as usual motion-capture clients such as game and film companies, Animazoo is keen to promote its technology in more novel areas. One of its cheaper electro-mechanical suits has been tested for use in karaoke bars, for example. In this case, the singer's movement is used to animate an onscreen CG character while lip synching is provided by phonetic recognition software which is fed by a small microphone attached to the headgear. Another experiment is the DJ-focused Exosense. This captures the movement of the wearer and uses it to generate sounds, loops, lights and visuals through interaction with a MIDI mixing desk and appropriate software. Perhaps the most bizarre idea, however, is the introduction of motion capture to the courtroom. Labelled forensic animation, Animazoo reckons its motion-capture systems have the potential to enable lawyers to present certain evidence in a much more jury-friendly manner.



OUT THERE
REPORTAGE

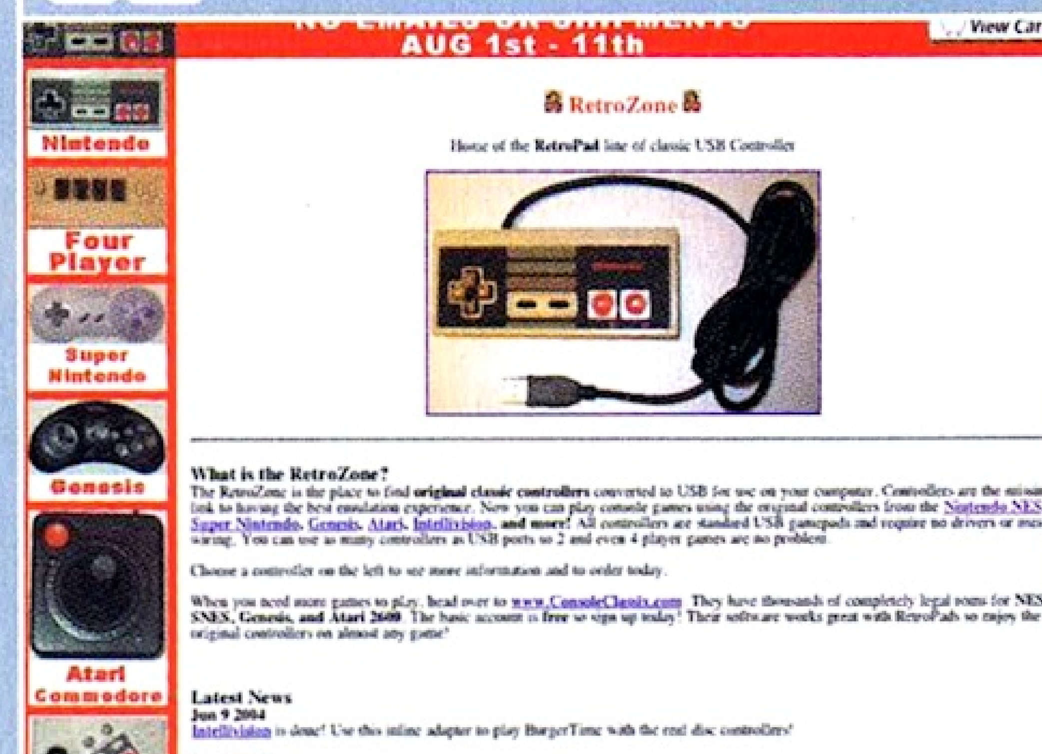


Well, would you look at... *that*. Honestly now, have you ever seen a marble texture of this sort of quality?









A free-standing TFT monitor capable of taking any signal you throw at it? For use in the car? Here it is



01 Knight takes queen

Holland: We love chess and we love love, so *Lovechess* (slogan: 'Watch the Gods make love!') is a guaranteed ten, at least in Out There story terms. In *Lovechess*' own words, 'make love not war' is the rule when pieces take each other, leading to 'diverse and unique animations for all movements varying from very tender to very bizarre'. Which is sort of awesome. But it gets better: 'You decide who will have sex, and with whom when you play the game. Imagine all the combinations that are possible'. Oh, we have, *Lovechess*, in front of a variety of digital media many times since puberty. The characters' sexy actions are appropriate to the piece's representation; pawns, for example, are soldiers, whose spears assume (what we'd imagine is quite dangerous) phallic roles. Lovechess costs US$17. For more information, head to www.lovechess.nl

02 Getting an NES advantage

US: Emulating old hardware on PCs is all well and good, but there's nothing like the feel of a SNES pad when you're hopping around corners on *Super Mario Kart*. It's not just that the cursor keys don't cut it, but something less easily defined: game pads have a feel, a weight, a history and an implied memory, and that's all lost when you try to recreate old software experiences with any kind of up-to-date input. Retrozone's function is more interesting than their mundane name suggests: they refit classic controllers for modern-day PCs, replacing awkward proprietary plugs with USB fittings. They also do converters and multitaps, and while their prices aren't cheap, their solutions are elegant, and sure to make you the envy of every geek in your neighbourhood – even that smug-looking fellow with the NES belt buckle. Visit them at www.sealiecomputing.com/retrozone

Soundbytes

"I might try *Dance Dance Revolution* [again], but I'm thinking no."
Kimber Wilson, 15, considers her arcade gaming future. The teenager's heart stopped during a game of *DDR* at a local arcade; she was revived by the owners, and later diagnosed with hypertrophy cardiomyopathy, a hereditary heart defect.

"We are facing a critical situation, in which the number of game players will decrease unless we change tack."
Nintendo chief Satoru Iwata implores the gaming industry to pursue innovation in a speech to the Japan Economic Foundation.

"Failure to obtain a new banking facility would materially adversely affect the company's operations and liquidity and the company could be forced to cease operations or seek bankruptcy protection."
Acclaim pleads for a stay of execution, but things are looking grim...

"Why would one enjoy to rape a hooter in a game?"
An internet forum poster questions the appeal of *GTA*.

03 Liquid crystal is back!

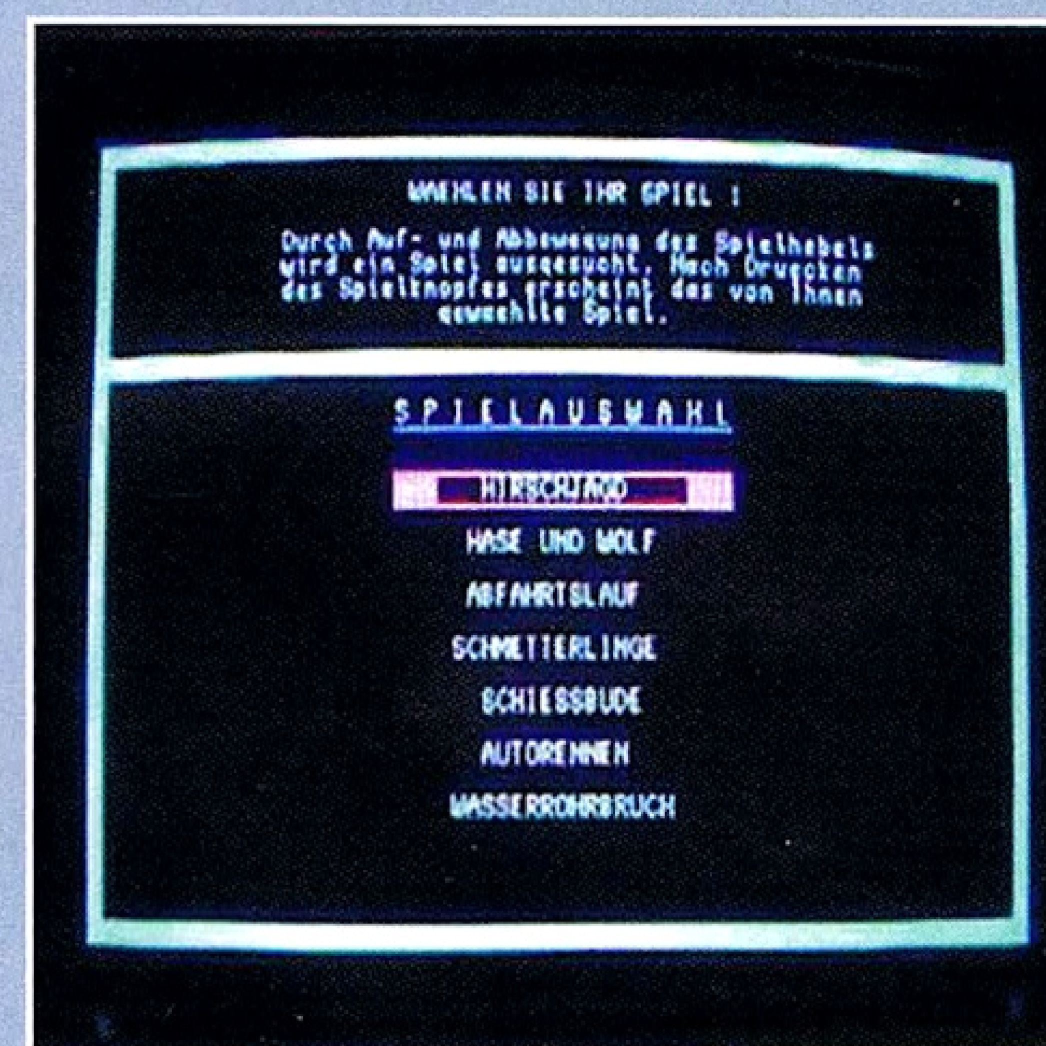
Germany: The last time we covered a PDRoms coding competition they were having a crack at reinventing *Robotron*. After the success of that they've moved on and, technologically speaking, backwards. Their latest programming free-for-all challenged users to create a Game & Watch-style game for their choice of (console) format, which meant a return to pseudo-LCDs for all participants with varying degrees of success. The winner, *Beer Belly Bill*, is a luscious tribute to Nintendo games of yore; also worth checking out are runner-up *Fred Firefighter*, and *MyRobot*, which came in third. All the entrants are available in a .zip file from www.pdroms.de (although without some kind of flash linking device you'll require emulators to run them). Have fun.

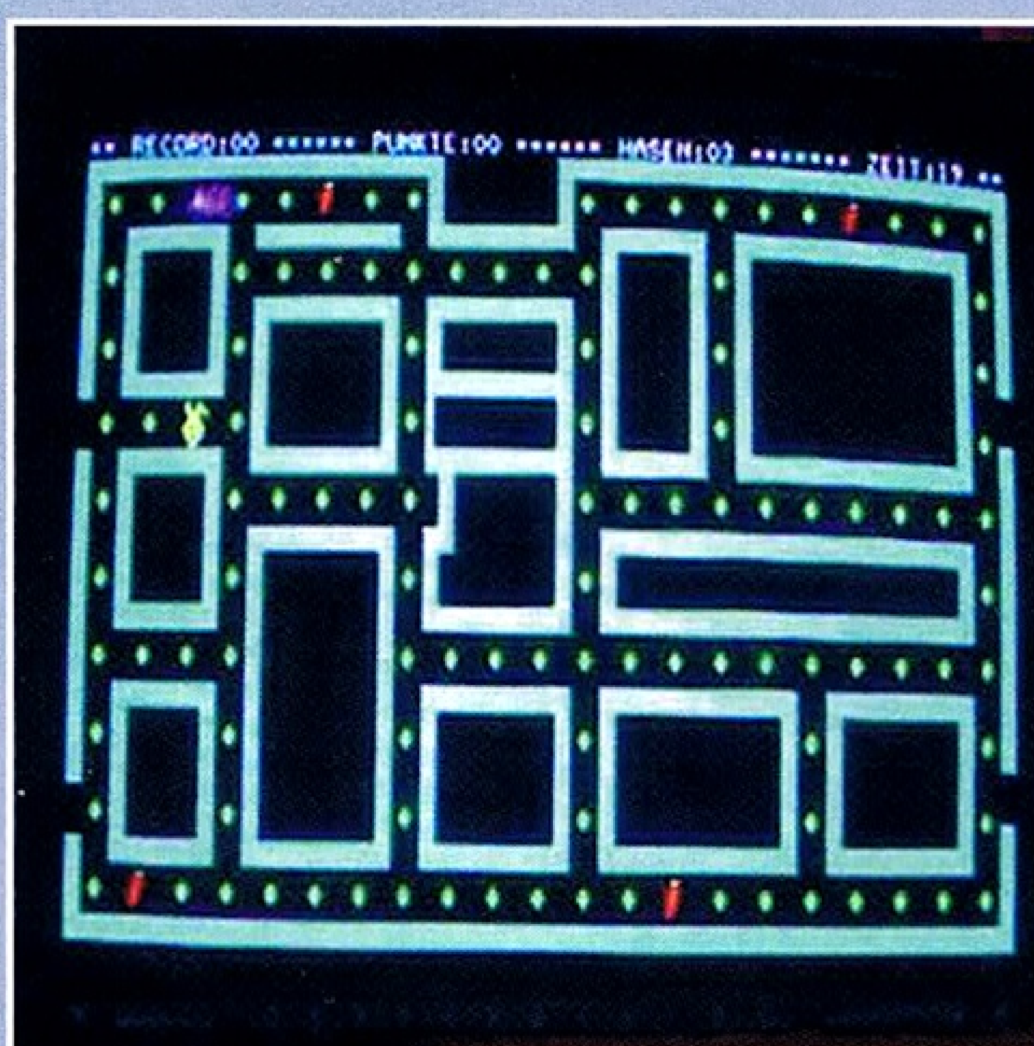
A visit to PDRoms will see you hooked up with *Beer Belly Bill*. Reminds us of *Beer Belly Burt's Brew Biz*

04 Who's a pretty poly?

UK: Swindon may not be the first place on your UK holiday itinerary, but if you fancy an excuse to visit the town's Museum of Computing, now might be a good time. The museum's latest acquisition is a Poly Play gaming machine, on loan from Andy Welburn (organiser of the Game On Barbican exhibition). The stand-up cabinet was manufactured in East Germany in 1985, and carries the curious honour of being the only arcade machine with Communist Party approval. It was one of 1,500 to be produced, but they were recalled for destruction at the fall of the Berlin wall; of the three left, one is on display in Germany, one is in a private collection, and the other now sits at the heart of the Swindon museum's High Score gaming exhibition. www.museum-of-computing.org.uk is the place to go for more information, but Swindon is the place to go.

The museum's website has come on a bit since its launch was promoted on TV by Edge's ex-publisher





05 Finally, productive camping

US: New York University's $5,125 summer camp is aimed at high school juniors and seniors – essentially anyone above the age of 17 who fancies five weeks behind a monitor without their parents yelling at them to go outside. 'Study and practice creating concepts and prototypes for games', it offers. 'Use the latest in software, hardware, and development tools. Experiment with a wide range of palettes and learn to turn your wildest gaming fantasies into reality'. Sounds simply ideal, although we aren't quite sure we'd want to see our wildest 17-year-old fantasies become reality. And then we're back to *Lovechess* again. Well-off students wishing to enroll for 2005 might want to keep an eye on www.scps.nyu.edu/departments/course.jsp?courseId=44666

You don't need to have long hair and mostly black clothes in order to sign up, although it might help

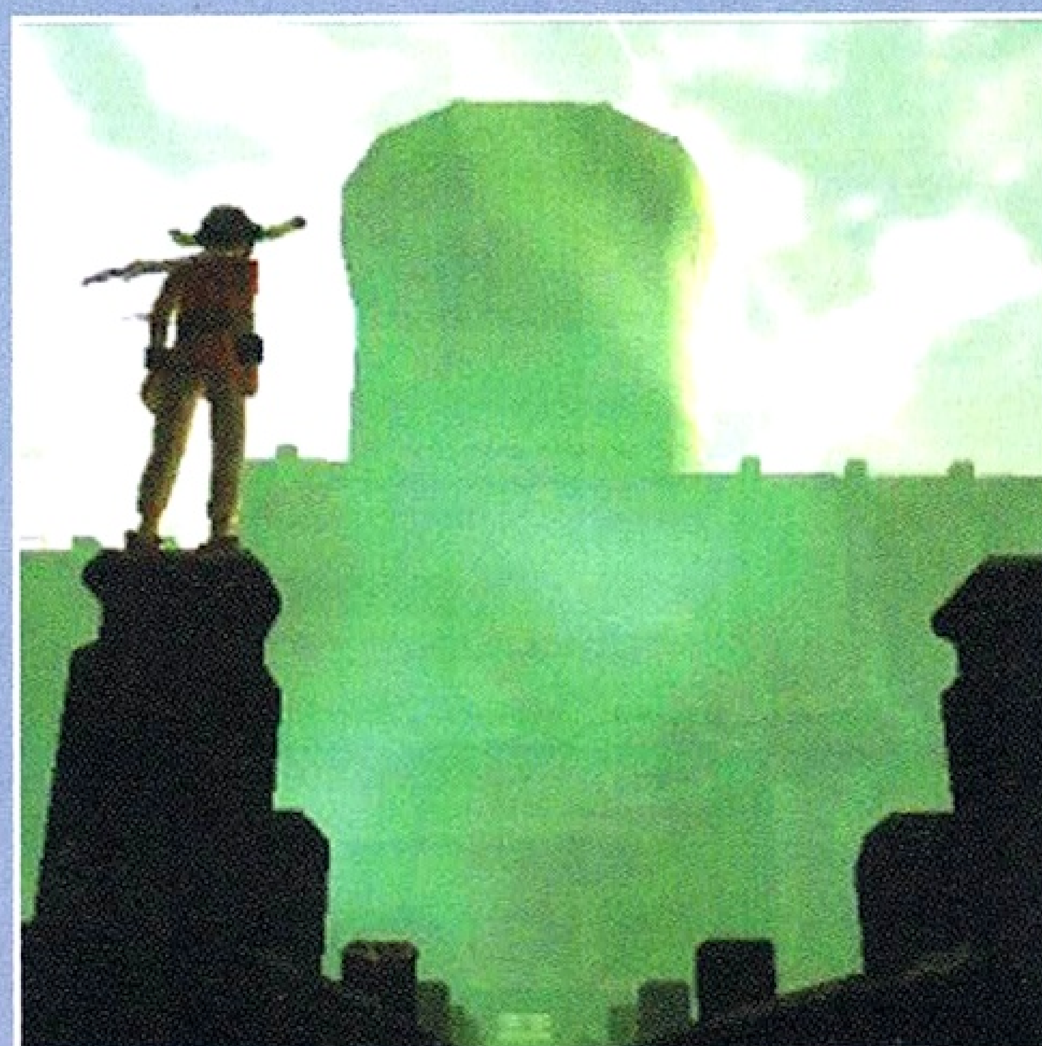
Data Stream If Word made games

Choice cuts from Microsoft's spellchecker, but what are they?

- **Frottage** 2D shmup fun with underwear
- **Ninja Maiden** Very hard but innocent bosses
- **World Of Aircraft** Massively multiplayer flying
- **Bobtail** A solar-powered cat
- **Vicarage** More chaining, vicar?
- **Shame** Ryo hides his face
- **Parapet The Rapper** Fortified rhythm action
- **Gyrator Man** Spinning to the music
- **Majorca's Mask** Makes it look like Tenerife
- **Grandma** An RPG for all the family
- **Metric Fusion** Imperial prime?



Author: Miyabe Miyuki
Publisher: Kodansha
ISBN: 4062124416



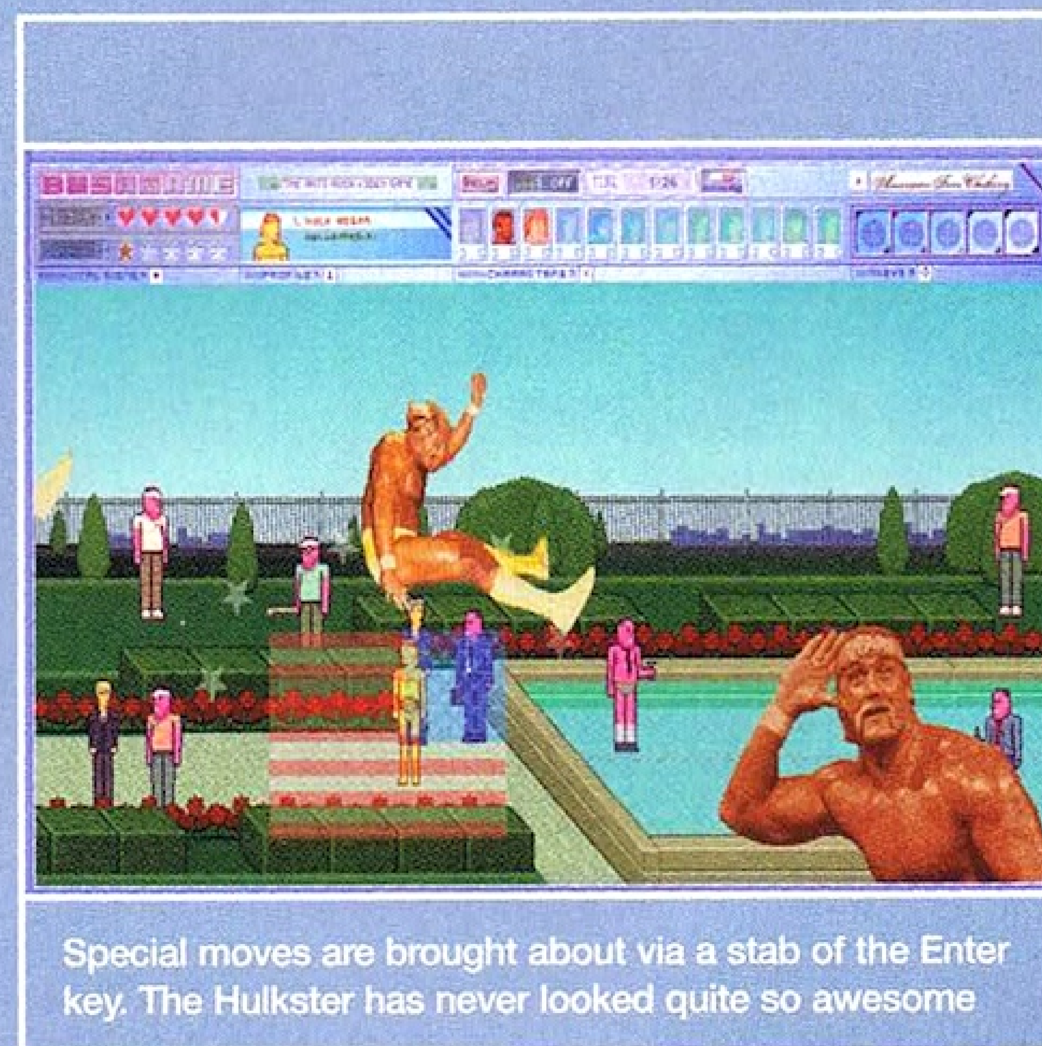


It's hard to imagine any other project fusing such careful pixelwork with antagonistic political sentiment



The artwork isn't all of the website creators' making, though – witness a star turn from a Japanese source

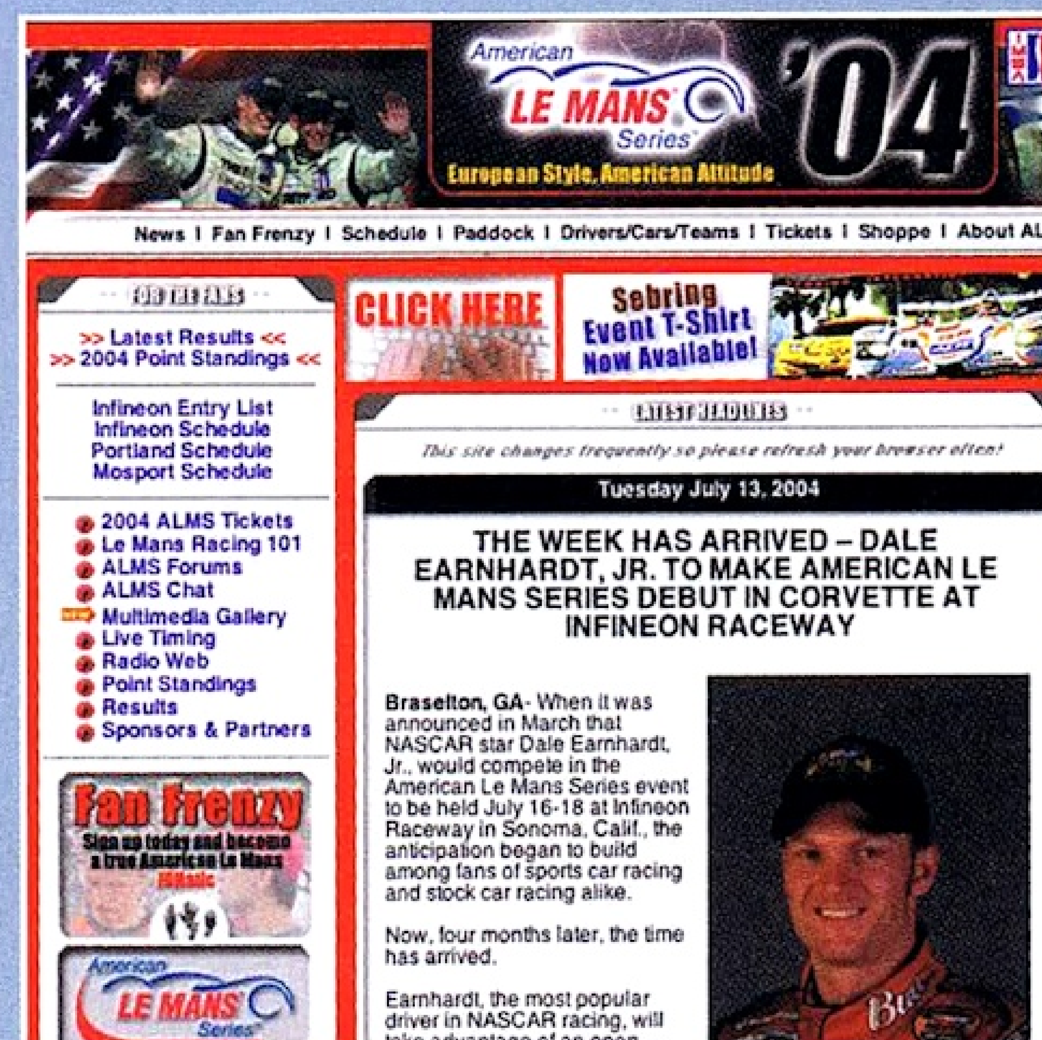




Special moves are brought about via a stab of the Enter key. The Hulkster has never looked quite so awesome



To make your own version at home, simply write 'Schumacher won' in crayon on your GBA's screen



06 Choose Yorda own adventure

Japan: One of *Ico*'s greatest triumphs is that it successfully tells gaming's most affecting tale using the medium's strengths – atmosphere and interaction. Curious, then, that it should be chosen as the basis for a novel. It was author Miyabe Miyuki who asked to write the book, rather than being approached to produce some cash-in merchandise. The tale roughly follows the adventure, padding out the story with background information that's sure to have the 12 people who actually purchased the game in the west drooling – providing they can read Japanese.

07 Beat about the Bush

US: We've already heard lots about how this year's presidential election is turning pop culture into a political battleground, Michael Moore's cinematic polemic and his opponents' shout-louder retorts making people pledge allegiance in theatres and bookstores across the US. It makes sense that supporters of both parties would eventually turn to videogames for promotion – at least when the Republicans have finished trying to ban them – and so it is with EmoGame 2.5. An contender for website of the month, www.emogame.com creates web-based side-scrolling brawlers that normally star members of angsty US alt.rock bands. EmoGame 2.5 dispenses with (most of) the emo, and pits He-Man, Mr T and Hulk Hogan against Bush, interspersing ropey game parody with facts (or propaganda, depending on your political views) about the current administration. It's an interesting use of technology, occasionally fascinating, and sometimes amusing. It's also totally tasteless, so viewer discretion is advised.

08 Card drivin'

US: The iCard is the stat-oriented motor-racing fan's idea of tech heaven: a cartridge that slots in the back of the GBA and provides up-to-date information on whatever event they're watching. Lap times, lap speeds, positions of racers and the gaps between them – you name it, if it involves men racing cars and it's measured in fractions of a second, it's there. Though it's of little use in Australia right now, the iCard system holds possibilities for the future of live sport over here, and not just for racers. There's no reason, for example, why AFL or NRL clubs couldn't stream highlights and replays to users' PSPs or DSs in a couple of years' time. And if there's money to be made doing it, they surely will. More info at www.icardus.com

Continue

PS3 to debut at E3 2005
Prepare to watch in awe as Sony delivers its biggest presentation ever
Games within games
How we wish the machines in *Spider-Man 2*'s arcade actually worked
The rise and rise of physics
It's been the future since *Exile* in '89

Quit

PS3 to debut at E3 2005
What's that? You aren't finished with your PS2 yet?
Driver 3 topping the charts
We haven't yet been able to find out how many were returned
This Disc Is Dirty Or Damaged
Actually, it turns out the Xbox is. Hmm

OUT THERE
MEDIA

09 The Zenith Angle

Within the triumvirate of pioneering cyberwriters, Bruce Sterling always seems to have been the odd one out. His co-author for The Difference Engine, William Gibson, has gone literary, while Neal Stephenson spawns historical swashbuckers. Sterling, however, seems content to sit in a transitory role. With his Wired column and writing gigs for Newsweek and Fortune, he has a much better idea of what's happening on the shopfloor of technology than his fellows. But, despite nine books, each punctuated by a characteristic mixture of humour, insight and readability, he hasn't made his mark as a novelist.

His latest attempt is The Zenith Angle. Set in the panic that gripped the US crypto-military complex in the months after 9/11, it follows the fortunes of Derek 'Van' Vandeveer. A veep of R&D in a soon-to-be dot-bombed internet traffic company, the computer security expert answers the call of the spooks, joining the Coordination of Critical Information Assurance Board. Mixing the rewards of building hack-proof streaming Grendel clusters with the trials of Washington-belt bureaucracy, it all makes for typical Sterling juxtaposition. With a deft poise, he has one security insider telling Van: "This is the future – it's phones against boxcutters, our networks versus their deathcult". In the new battlefield of cyberwar, it's time for the geeks to stand up and be counted. Yet in what turns out to be a bumpy narrative ride – culminating in a conclusion at which even a Tom Clancy ghostwriter would baulk – you're never really sure if Sterling is himself fully onboard, or subtly poking fun at the current state of affairs.

10 First Person

And so MIT Press continues its assault on the rockface of computer game theory. Reflecting much of the heat and vim of the academic standoff between ludologists and narrativists, First Person makes for some interesting reading. Within each section – broken down into broad areas such as cyberdrama, critical simulation and game theories – one writer sallies forth with their own particular view. This is then briefly critiqued on the bottom third of the page by another academic, while yet another then tries to bring some conclusion to the debate with a short ending statement, which is more fully expounded on the book's website (www.electronicbookreview.com). It doesn't make for pretty book design, but does provide the lay reader with a better view of where the disagreements lie. And, yes, are there some disagreements. The basic battlelines are set between those who see games in terms of narrative and stories (Brenda Laurel/Janet Murray) and those who prefer to see the medium as fundamentally about the game experience (Jesper Juul/Espen Aarseth/Markku Eskelkinen). The likes of MIT's Henry Jenkins attempt the role of mediator, his narrative architecture theory incorporating both story and play elements through the introduction of the concepts of game space and environment. Of course, the wider question of how this sort of debate improves the quality of games is less well formulated. It's not an issue for most academics as few are actually involved in game development. Yet the concepts discussed should prove useful for the thoughtful game designer, even one locked into our currently stratified genres.

09



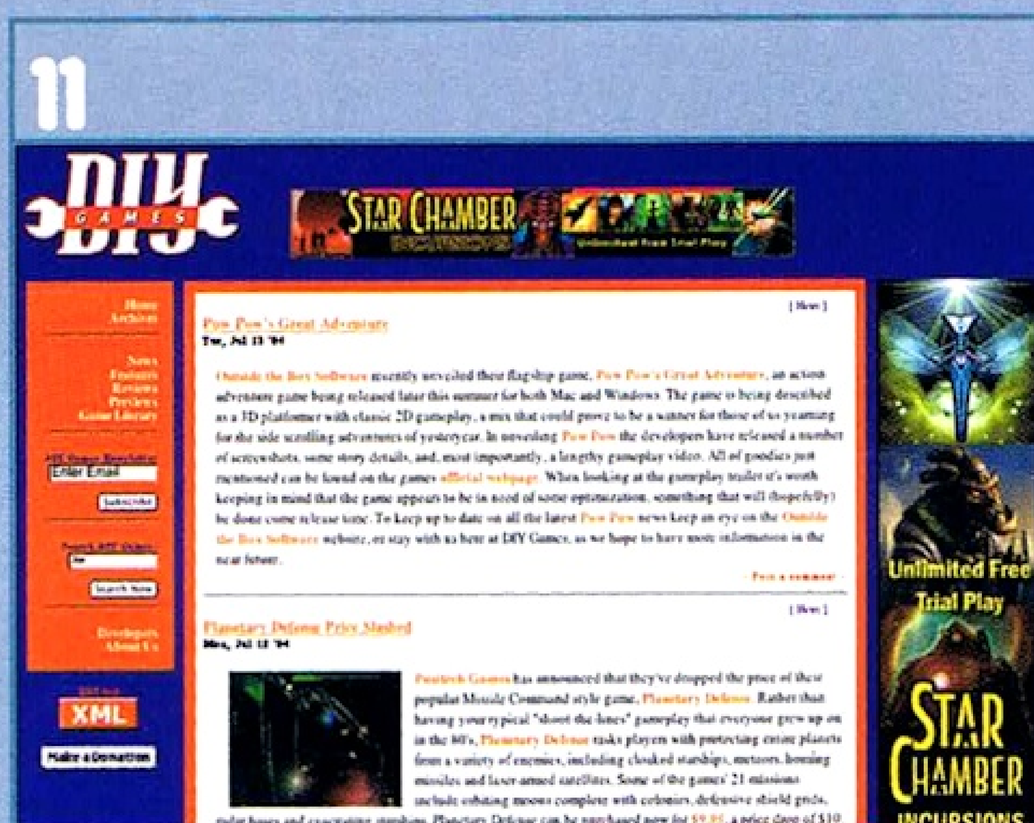
Author: Bruce Sterling
Publisher: Ballantine
ISBN: 0 345 46061 8

10



Author: Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan (eds)
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 0 262 23232 4

11



Site: **DIY Games**
URL: **diygames.com/**

11 Website of the Month

As the big publishers' game-making budgets creep steadily higher, and their reluctance to take chances grows in proportion to that, so it follows that real innovation seems like it can only come from the underground. That's why so much interest lies with the homebrew development scene, and DIYgames provides a fine way of keeping up with what's going on out there, eliminating the need to trawl a dozen sites just to find out what's new. With clean design and a simple brief, the site targets a niche, and successfully fills it.

12 Advertainment

This American TV ad for Sony's *Singstar* karaoke title features a performance that must merit the lowest number of points ever scored in the game.



The song begins: "People always talk about… ey-oh, ey-oh-ey-oh." Oh, the poetry of Jamelia



The small audience seems to like it, though, despite these two being unable to carry a tune in a bucket



"I dont know what it is, That makes me feel like this, I dont know who you are…" Thank God for that



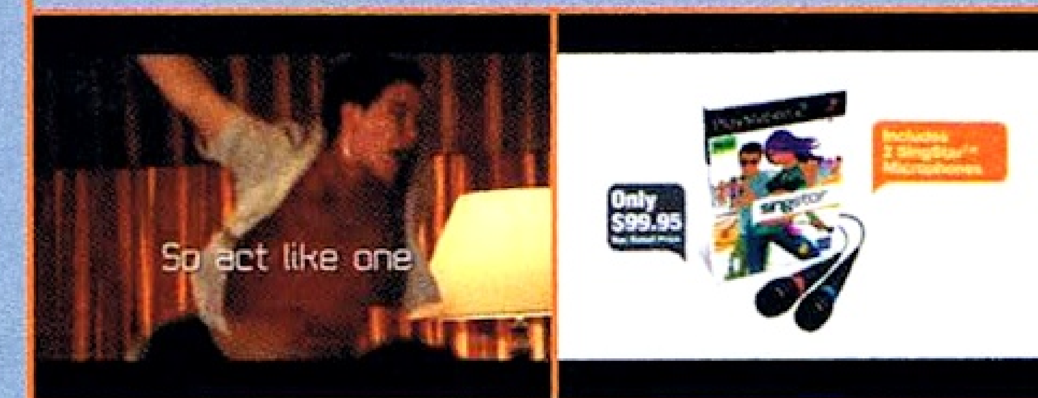
Much to everyone's dismay, our over-excited new friend is such a slave to the beat he leaps on the sofa



No, no – not the bottle. Don't do it. Oh, he has. True rockstar that he is, he pours water over his head



Does he bite the head off a bat? Alas, no. Exposing his nipples makes him feel like a superstar, however



The fine line between 'star' and 'arse' has well and truly been crossed here. Can you do better?



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Spreading the word

It begins at a dinner, a function celebrating something or other, where RedEye is on a table with a few other videogame industry luminaries, just talking, when one of the guys sat across from him says it: "Do you even *like* games?" Allah, God, oh pleasant, merciful Jehovah: when the spots clear and the waiter's mopped up the wine and the people nearby stop looking and the band strikes up again, RedEye clears his throat and begins.

"Yes."

But he leaves it there, because obviously there's no point in arguing with someone who can't see the point in questioning the merit of those games that would destroy games, even though the argument itself is simple. Games are hyped to number one and sell millions, providing a short-term boost, but this also dissuades non-gamers who've bought into the hype from ever taking a chance on another game again. It does get RedEye thinking: how can we tempt more people into gaming? How are people ever going to find out which of our spectacular new worlds to visit? Simple. We need a brochure.

A holiday brochure. Glossy, inviting, promising exotic lands, full-page screenshots, full-on adjectives. Full of hyperbole, sure, but not lies. Every moment captured within would be available for intrepid adventurers to experience for themselves. Some of the moments wouldn't be replicated by some of the holidaymakers, but they'd never be totally outlandish claims, never be fictional. These would be postcards from the art's frontiers. Come To Videogames! See The Sights! Feel The Magic!

You can see… The Grottos. In *Rogue*, 20 years ago, when ASCII characters became the darkest of creatures in your head. When you reached unexplored dungeons, three levels below the farthest you'd ever been before, and you knew that each step forward was a step into the unknown and a step closer to permanent death. That pioneering spirit you felt then is the same as you feel now when you pick up the game for old time's sake, and it has never been bettered, only equalled.

The Night Sky. When you experienced freedom for the first time in the shape of *Elite*. You were leaping from star to star, growing in confidence, then all of a sudden there's a glitch, and the Cobra is trapped between points, stuck in witchspace. A cluster of Ls on your radar and closing, a brief glimpse of something alien, octagonal, before the shrieking lasers sliced through your warbling shields, and your hull surrendered. When the pixel-dust faded, and, without a FAQ or helpline, you found yourself wondering this: 'What just happened? Who were they? How can I make it happen again?' You never found out, and you never forgot.

The Old Citadels. When *Doom* forced you to accept that virtual reality would not be born from expensive neck-breaking headsets, but was appearing right now, in our homes. *Wolfenstein* was still Hunt The Wumpus: this was real life. When you saw polygon stairs and climbed them to an open window, peered out on to the balcony and saw mountains in the distance. You were in another world, a world where architecture was no longer writ in two-dimensional bitmaps but with pillars and vertices. You took your first steps through what would be a thousand id-inspired corridors, and held your breath.

As you swaggered along, night turned to day and the screen bleached with red. For a moment you just stood there and watched

The Ballroom. Understanding *Dance Dance Revolution*. Not an on-screen moment, this, but more a skew of perspective, the sense of synapses worming, touching, connecting in your head. When the game became less about reacting to the arrows at the top of the screen, and more about interpreting a musical store. When you suddenly worked out how to read the phrasing, and *Dance Dance Revolution* became about dancing, not twitching. When the power balance between you and the constant arrow dictation shifted in your favour, and you regained your freedom.

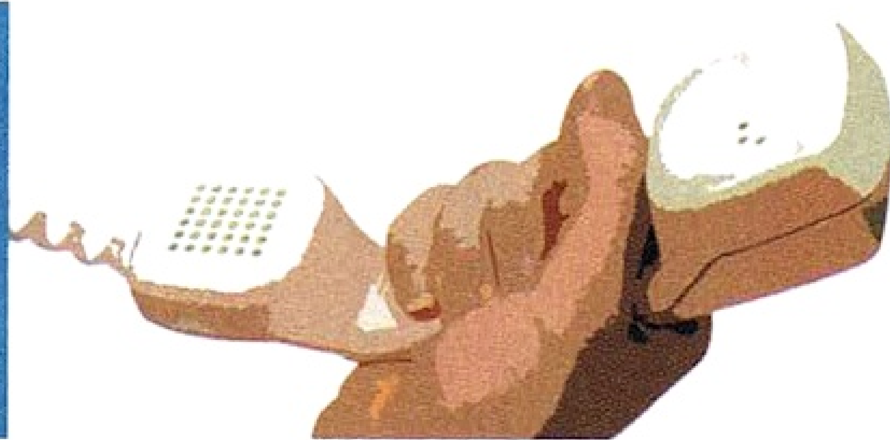
The Beach. The first time you walked along the shore and saw the sun rise over Liberty City. Maybe you drove out there with a prostitute in tow, murdered her for your money-back guarantee and then found yourself on the stretch of sand wondering what was just beyond that rocky outcrop. As you swaggered along, night turned to day and the screen bleached with red. For a moment you just stood there and watched. In the distance, a plane cut through the haze and you found yourself wondering: who is on that plane? Where are they going to land? Where have they come from? And for a moment you were there, a citizen of a strange land, feeling something that no other medium has the capacity to provide.

The Countryside. *Halo*'s rolling vistas felt more solid than any alien landscape yet, perhaps because they were populated by enemies of such fearsome intelligence. Or apparently, anyway, since once again your head wrote stories in the gaps between the AI waypoints. The hills were alive with the sound of Grunts, Jackals and Elites.

On level two, when you cowered behind the ridge and watched them prowl around the beacon, you caught a glimpse of the ring curling above you, a pale blue burst of light screaming to Halo's centre, and you knew you were going to die, but die happy.

There are more. Thrilling instances in videogaming can be intensely personal, but they're the reason we play. RedEye would love to hear your ideas for the brochure – his (new) email address is at the end of this column. Go glossy, go furious. Understand that there have to be negatives, things to rail against and people to rail against them. Understand that, and balance the negatives with the positives. Evangelise, but evangelise with care, because if we keep on praising the wrong things, we'll always be holidaying alone.

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s.*
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LOCAL CALL

A phone call to the Australian development scene

Creative Assembly on the creative process

Wrapping up *Rome: Total War* has been a big job for Creative Assembly. Aside from the piles of work that this project demanded by its nature, CA arguably made things a step harder for themselves by having the dev-team split across two offices… Across the globe rather than across town.

We called George Fidler, General Manager of the Creative Assembly studios in Fortitude Valley, and asked how the team(s) managed it

"That's the 64-million dollar question. I think if you'd asked us even just two years ago whether co-development could have worked, the answer probably would have been no," said Fidler, the proudly continuing,

"In the past we've tried and failed at co-development, but I think technology became affordable enough, in particular for us the ability to run a very cost effective wide-area network around the world. Two or three years ago you needed to spend tens of thousands of dollars on communications to set up a virtual private network. Now with ADSL we have a 2 Mega byte asynchronous link for a VPN connection with the UK that supports not only the interchange of data, but video conferencing, and even voice over IT."

That's not new, so why now then?

"Technology has always been there, but it's always been very expensive and now quite frankly they're extremely affordable, and I think that's one aspect of it."

"I think another aspect is that programs have become so huge that we just had to implement the systems and the infrastructure needed to support a distributed development effort."

As though teams are already being split up by having to be departmentalised at all?

"The days of having five people in a room are really gone now, and whole bits of the game like audio and art are quite commonly being outsourced. On this project we (the Brisbane office) actually did some art, all the audio and part of the programming effort remotely, so we really had to put in place the sort of infrastructure that would support that level of involvement. We weren't operating on the fringe of development process, we were actually at the very heart of it.

"One on the practical things that we did was break the project up into functional responsibilities. So we were able to allocate to each resource to each area of the game, and to some degree that allowed us to develop technologies discreetly," describes Fidler.

"But obviously all of those technologies are integrated, so inevitably we needed to communicate with them (the UK), and they with us. We had to make a very conscious effort to *increase* the level of communication around the company. That was a learning curve for us and took time and a deliberate effort," Fidler summized before we asked if they found that with video conferencing was just as important as moving data and code every day?

"Absolutely," confirmed Fidler, "We found that email and even newsgroups are not a place to have a conversation. They're a great place to assemble and disseminate information once you've decided on it, but not to communicate. We found that in particular, video conferencing was a far more effective way to have a conversation and to communicate that level of detail. It was also handy for being able to tell when people were passionate about issues."

There was virtually no part of the day that someone at Creative Assembly wasn't working on Rome…

When asked how does the time difference affect the whole scenario, Fidler explained,

"On this project we really had a 'Follow the sun' development cycle. There was virtually no part of the day when someone at Creative Assembly wasn't working on Rome. It meant that by adjusting our working days so stayed back a couple of hours at night to have an overlap with the UK, in that time we could communicate the things we were working on, they could communicate with us, and we could resolve issues. Then they'd have a whole working cycle without us being there. We'd come in next morning and basically pick up where they left off.

"So we were able to use the time-framing to our advantage in many regards, but I don't want to underestimate the effort we put into elevating communication around the team, becase at the best of times, coders are not known for their communication skils."

So is Creative Assembly one of the pioneers or early adopters of this sort of system?

"No question about it," declares Fidler stating,"almost every other developer we spoke to said that co-development was impossible, and for many years it was genuinely was. It takes a willingness to pull it off, because the reality is that projects are enormous these days. Teams are growing up over fifty members, so you need to improve the standards of communication and management in any case."

"In the old days when you were working with small teams, the reality was that you could get away with less management - You could physically run projects with less direction," notes Fidler with fond memories.

When asked if online vid-comm becoming more affordable, was likely to result in a new wave of developers who always just work with a team from their home, Fidler agreed immediately,

"Absolutey. I think we've seen the beginning of that already. Basically what we're talking about is overcoming the tyranny of distance. Now that infrastructure has been put in place to manage remote resources, it no longer matters that the resources reside in the largest markets in the world – Opening windows of opportunity. We're seeing more projects being developed in more and more obscure places. Places where there are talent, and the development costs are very economic. I think as the market matures the rigid rules of the industry are starting to get broken."

Promising news for hobbyists and dreamers… Everywhere apparently.

Local Call is a just that, a call to a local developer. If you have comments on this article, send them to Email: edge@derwenthoward.com.au



BIFFOVISION

Page 26, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

A tale of two Davids

Art is subjective. One man's Picasso is another man's pissy old rubbish, which is precisely why most art critics contribute less to society than the average crack whore. Simply put, you can't win a debate about art. If you call a piece of art 'crap', the artist can argue: "Ah, but you're talking about it, therefore the art has served its purpose, and excuse me one moment while I insert this Polaroid of myself into my own bottom." It's a reasonable point, but does it apply to games, in an industry whose critics frequently credit a game's graphics with their own rating?

A wise man once remarked that he didn't see the point of paintings; why spend all that time trying to recreate a sunset when it'd be far easier and less time-consuming to capture one in a photograph? See, the whole reason people from The Olden Times used to paint was because they were too stupid to have invented cameras, but through hissing clouds of steam. I even invited my father round to show him the rippling water, gently waving foliage and the texture of rocks. I was profoundly entranced by the lush, tropical locale, the crystal-blue sea, soaring birds, darting fish and the glow bugs which glittered as night fell.

It was only when I called my 86 daughters in from the garden to point out the awe-inducing wonder of a mountaintop vista did I get slapped back into reality. Rather than be awed like myself, they were utterly unimpressed. And why should they have been otherwise? They'd just been out in the garden, where there were all the realistic textures and bouncing shadows and gently waving foliage you could ever want. Out in the garden were real birds, and real worms, and a real man watching them from the bushes. In the garden, things didn't ever slow down because too much stuff was going on. In the garden you could beautiful, but it's a different kind of beauty to *Wind Waker*. Though *Wind Waker* could've looked a little less bare, I respected what Nintendo was trying to do. I looked forward to the series being developed along similar lines, with the visual style being refined and built upon. Rather than stick to its guns, Nintendo has ditched the cel shading for a more realistic visual style. It seems that the days of genuine game artistry are already behind us.

Take a look at *Jak II*. It's a fun game, it looks good, but it's woefully un-designed. There's a bland laziness to the visuals, a sense they're merely serving a function rather than trying to impress. The examples of genuine gaming artistry – of worlds that have been *designed* for more than just functionality – are being outnumbered by the breathless race for simulation. Or, in the case of firstperson shooters, a campaign to reintroduce bland, 1960s concrete-block architecture. For would the reality of the Mona Lisa have had more worth than a painstakingly rendered portrait?

I had another PC die on me this week. I'm now on my third this year, and have finally given up on laptops due to the fact they either keep getting too hot, and bursting into flames, or I punch them until the screen breaks. For once, it wasn't too painful a purchase to make. I'd been meaning to upgrade ever since I bought the previous useless piece of badness, which first bust more or less the day I got it, and was barely powerful enough to run *Minesweeper*. This time around I bit the bullet, and went for a throbbing beast. With *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* en route, and having suffered the indignity of playing *Far Cry* with the graphics settings so low that it was could've been *An Exciting Adventure In Origamiland*, I'd been getting jitters that I'd be left out of the fun.

Touch wood (matron!), but thus far it's proving a good buy. Apologies for stating what all of you already know, but *Far Cry* really does look as amazing as all those reviews said. Far and away, it's the most impressive recreation of reality ever seen in a game. I wasted about an hour on the carrier level just looking at the way the light played off a set of steps, and glimmered on the surface of a torpedo. I shot at light fittings so I could watch shadows bounce around corridors, refracting throw a rock, and shatter next door's greenhouse, and you wouldn't think to stop and admire the way the glass fell to the ground as the sun flared off each individual shard. Admittedly, because you'd be too busy legging it, but I digress.

The girls were thoroughly unimpressed by

The examples of genuine gaming artistry – of worlds that have been *designed* for more than just functionality – are being outnumbered

Far Cry purely because the whole thing did look so realistic. "It's like a photograph," one of them remarked. And she wasn't wrong (although technically she was, because photographs don't move, the stupid little idiot).

As gorgeous as *Far Cry* is, you can appreciate that perhaps more time went into programming the routines to recreate light and shadows, and wavy plants, as it did the look of the game. How designed was the game world anyway? No doubt the trees, the huts, the guns and the costumes were referenced from real-life counterparts. In fact, the least impressive aspects of the game were the elements not drawn from real equivalents; the monsters were all a bit uninspired. It's endemic of a problem at the heart of gaming's trajectory.

My colon whimpered when I saw screenshots of Nintendo's next Zelda opus. It may indeed look every *Viewtiful Joe* there are a thousand *Jak II*s. For every *Ico* there's a *Full Spectrum Warrior*. For every *XIII*, or *Rayman*, a hundred *Special Ops: Red Mercury*s or *Goldeneye 2*s or *Grand Theft Auto*s.

Perhaps I'm woefully out of step with public sensibilities, but it seems a shame that fewer and fewer developers are investing in the visual side of things with any sort of coherent sense of design. Don't get me wrong – simulation has its place. You'd have trouble transporting yourself into *FIFA 2005* if the players were super-deformed caricatures, while the whole point of the *Gran Turismo* series is that it gives you the opportunity to drive cars you're too much of an impoverished pleb to ever be able to drive in real life. But there comes a point where you have to ask: why? Why does everything have to look so real and homogenised all of a sudden?

We need some more David Hockneys creating the visuals in our games, and a few less David Baileys. Who's he?

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with **Edge***'s*

Edge's most wanted

Phantom Brave

La Pucelle has only made us hungrier for a more fully evolved version of Nippon Ichi's meticulous detail and terrifying depth. Book your holiday slots now.



(PS2) Nippon Ichi

Odama

Pinball and samurai: it's a match as timeless as matt black plastic and faux-wood veneer. Yoot Saito's art of war is a more enticing proposition than Sun Tzu's.



(GC) Nintendo

Starcraft: Ghost

Our anticipation had wavered during the uncertain delays, but the news that *Metal Arms'* Swinging Ape is *Ghost's* new developer has brought it flooding back.



(GC, PS2, Xbox) Vivendi

Destroy All Humans!

Why do we want to destroy all humans? We blame TV, videogames and the 1950s B-movies we saw as teenagers. Watch the skies, they are coming…



(PS2, Xbox) THQ

Hands across the world

Of all the things that make games off-putting to newcomers, the joypad is the worst offender. Abstract and complex, it's easy to forget the years of practice that have ingrained the arcane notions of toggling, Y-axis inverting and D-pad selecting into our brains. The DualShock has 12 buttons. A piano has 12 notes. One we expect to pick up and use. The other we expect to take us ten years to master.

That's a preposterous analogy, of course. *Spider-Man 2* is hardly a Chopin prelude. It would, however, do the industry good if developers and publishers occasionally over-estimated the oddness of the joypad rather than continually underestimating it. Or, even more radically, is the answer to abolish it? Ditch the digitally abstract in favour of the physically instinctive? Three of this month's prescreens are joypadless. EyeToy, after a rather fallow period, is now being exploited by some of the most revered names in gaming: Konami and Sega. GameTrak, the system that uses tensioned strings and clip-on attachments to accurately replicate a full 3D range of movement, is readying for launch. Both systems have vast potential and make gaming an instant draw for those previously put off by not instinctively understanding that the circle button means cancel.

How can the joypad hope to survive now that movement sensing has become viable, portable and cheap? Why should gamers continue to tolerate something which has only been incrementally improved over the last 30 years? For now, developers hold half the answer to that question and gamers the other. Developers are struggling to successfully exploit the immediacy they offer. The whack-a-mole basics of EyeToy have long since worn thin and GameTrak has a long way to go before its software matches the solidity of its hardware. It will need both manifest creativity and encouraging market conditions before they begin to be mastered.

And gamers? We have to decide how willing we are to sweat. Both systems are capable of reducing your arms to flapping tubes of jellied agony. There are no machines in the gym that can prepare you for what happens when a truly compulsive videogamer meets an EyeToy. Which means, for now, that the joypad is safe. After all, of all the forces in the world, few are as unassailable as laziness.













Oddworld Stranger

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **Oddworld Inhabitants**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q1 2005**

Oddworld goes west and finds a new hero, a new style, and a new twist on animal cruelty



Oddworld Inhabitants, partly because it's a nice pun, wants you to believe that Oddworld Just Got Stranger. It's a valid gag, since *Stranger*'s titular hero is a departure for the series: mean, graceful and self-assured. But it's also a bit of a con because, in many ways, Oddworld just got normaller. *Stranger* takes the series into the realms of far more conventional gameplay, namely a thirdperson/firstperson adventure with guns, puzzles and fistfights.

However, Stranger is far from being a conventional game hero. Part bear, part Aslan and part Ron Perlman, he strides through the game's lavish western pastiche like he owns it. Pick up a new bounty from the office in town and then stalk off into the sunset, looking to even some scores and earn some readies. If you should forget where you're headed, you can talk to yourself, causing Stranger to growl out some reminders about what you've signed up for. You are free to toggle between thirdperson and firstperson modes at any time, but the game does impose some rules. Approach an obstacle – say, a rope that needs to be climbed – and the game will slide you automatically into thirdperson so you can see more clearly what you're doing. In thirdperson, however, your offence is limited to fists. Firstperson is where your gun comes out.

Except it's not a gun and it doesn't shoot bullets. Stranger carries a double-barrelled shortbow, but before you can fire it you'll need to hunt some ammunition. Load it with wasps, skunks and chipmunks and you'll discover each critter has unique powers. A spider will wrap an enemy in a web cocoon, immobilising him until you scoop him up for the bounty; skunks become stink bombs and wasps serve as your machine gun.

The world Stranger hunts in is vast and lavish. The only level Oddworld Inhabitants has revealed so far – an assault on a well-patrolled fort – is intricate, offering several points of entry and lines of attack. Enemies are serious enough to make the firefights matter, but stupid enough to make it feel like this is still Oddworld. Even the boss lurking inside appears to have been calibrated for fun rather than frustration.

The game could hardly look more promising. With a style all its own and a confident spin on some enduringly successful gameplay, *Stranger* might already have the burgeoning western craze all sewn up. The biggest question hanging over it, perhaps, is just how it's all going to be crammed into an ageing PlayStation2.





The village sections are where Oddworld's traditional humour becomes most apparent. The grumpy hysteria of the local chicken-people is suprisingly endearing and is ably matched by the expressive and entertaining animation

Sniper Elite

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: TBC
Developer: Rebellion
Origin: UK
Release: Q1 2005

It's an impeccably researched, super-realistic WWII game! But hold your flogged, dead horses: Rebellion has a fresh take





The game currently includes a rather gory 'bullet-cam'. Great for confirming kills, it's a little harder to stomach the sight of your bullet spiralling unstoppably into an unsuspecting eye socket

It may be 1945, and it may be Berlin, but this isn't quite the game you're expecting. *Sniper Elite*'s American hero, a laconic special forces operative, has been dispatched to the city to set his sights not on the Germans, but the Russians. The United States, having got to hear of a Russian plot to seize experimental German nuclear weapons, has realised that it's the Eastern Bloc which is about to pose the biggest threat to world peace. This isn't a late WWII, this is an early Cold War.

Although you'll be able to explore and fight in thirdperson, the game's heart is the firstperson sniping mode. You'll be required to consider wind and trajectory degradation, as well as needing to get into position early enough for your pulse to steady. Berlin has been majestically recreated, and the potential for learning the secrets of the rubbled streets and of the thrill of locating that perfectly shadowed rooftop is enormous. The game's multiplayer also presents peculiar possibilities: will other human players really have the patience to sit it out right at the other end of the map? An unusual prospect indeed.

With the game already close to completion, Rebellion intends to announce a publisher for *Sniper Elite* in the coming months.





As things stand, the oddest element of the game's HUD is the health bar, which squeezes a human figure into one side of your compass

Star Wars Republic Commando

Format: PC, Xbox
Publisher: LucasArts
Developer: In-house
Origin: US
Release: February 2005

Republic Commando may have filched Samus Aran's visor, but it doesn't seem to have stolen her sense of adventure





Your commandos are ordered through a panel of icons displayed on your HUD. The system is fluid, helpfully indicating each trooper's health



Bigger enemies require your troopers to make the best use of space, and these moments, rather than the more predictable corridor gunfights, show up their AI limitations



The clue is maybe in the fact that the squad you command is made up of clones. The theory behind LucasArts' shooter is sound – blend the immediacy of an FPS with the depth of an on-the-fly squad game, and set it in the increasingly over-crowded but endlessly appealing Star Wars universe. The practice – so far – is looking disappointing.

Your clone troopers feel clumsy, and your command over them is basic at best. Although they can be trusted to heal each other when wounded, you'll be required to laboriously instruct each one in turn to use the healing station they're all slumped against. As extra firepower they work well in plain corridor sections, but once confronted with a boss they're as likely to be in the way as not.

Context-sensitive commands (such as the door-breaching manoeuvre demoed to such effect at E3) break up the monotony, but may not be enough to convey the sense of being in true control of three other individuals.

It may be that there is a lot more to the game than LucasArts is currently willing to show. There's certainly plenty of time for more variety, depth and precision to be worked into the basic framework. Without it, however, *Republic Commando* could remain as soulless as its troops.

Red Ninja: End Of Honour

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Vivendi
Developer: Tranji
Origin: Japan
Release: October

Even lady ninjas armed with cheesewire have to face off against the ultimate enemy: the thirdperson camera





The Tetsugen is a means of locomotion as well as execution, but Spider-Man's fluid web-slinging may overshadow some of Kurenai's more mechanical and limited wire moves

There's no question that Kurenai, *Red Ninja*'s heroine, is going to become something of an icon. Her underwear-flashing acrobatics generated thousands of downloads of the game's E3 demo, and her seduction attacks (which lure guards to a bloody death with a come-hither giggle) constitute a new kind of fighting dirty. Her short skirt isn't just idle titillation, however. It adds to her sense of character as she soars through caves and dungeons light as gossamer. Her Tetsugen wire – her only real weapon – is a potent threat, but her defences are surprise and ingenuity. This is the other end of Sam Fisher's tooled-up spectrum.

What works well is the creativity of combat, as you string up unsuspecting guards and scythe their torsos in two with a slick twist of your wire. The balance of exploring, fighting and puzzling is also strong, with each level seeing you move smoothly from one task to the next. It was never a game that was going to dominate through its visuals, but the worlds are smoothly presented and imaginatively designed. At this stage in development, the most pressing problem is the camera. Though its swooping movements are dramatic and satisfying, Kurenai's disregard for gravity presents it with some serious problems to which it does not yet have solutions.



The puzzle sections seen so far are very straightforward – decapitated guards can be dragged on to pressure points to disarm traps

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War

Format: PC
Publisher: THQ
Developer: Relic
Origin: UK
Release: October

With painted miniatures at the ready, it's time to delve into the future-gothic world of Relic's ambitious new RTS





The interface is large, clunky and a touch intrusive, appearing as it does at the top and bottom of the screen. The mini-map works well



Your troops can be viewed from any perspective or level of zoom, meaning you can zip around with ease or take a detailed interest in the carnage



Where *Neverwinter Nights* brought us tabletop D&D on the desktop PC, *Dawn Of War* digitises Warhammer 40,000. It's a bit *Age Of The Empire Strikes Back* and, sticking with the inappropriate Star Wars theme, reminds us a little of *Force Commander*. Villagers – sorry – Servitors build structures, which in turn pump out infantry, vehicles, giant demons, etc, and, unusually, many troops fight just as well up close as with their guns. The focus is on the combat, with resource management limited to node-capturing.

The four races, Space Marines, Orks, Eldar and Chaos, are very similar to their tabletop incarnations. The Marines are powerful but expensive, Orks are inaccurate but numerous and work best in mobs, Chaos are a bit like the Marines but with the addition of demons and demigods. The Eldar (space elves, really) are the most interesting. Fragile but superb shots, the subtle balance of their Aspect Warriors can make or break an army. They also have the game's best animation, as their Wraithlord dishes out kicks and chops that look great in the zoomable and rotatable 3D engine.

Disappointingly, there are no Genestealers, as seen in *Space Hulk*, and, in the preview build, no singleplayer campaign. But developments on the battlefield will be awaited with interest.

Sega Superstars

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sega
Developer: In-house (previously Sonic Team)
Origin: Japan
Release: Q4 2004

Virtua Fighter and The House Of The Dead get the set-top camera treatment in what could be a very good month for Sony's EyeToy





With eight more minigames to unveil, there's hope for more gameplay flexibility than the usual EyeToy slap-the-bad-guy speciality

Regardless of how novel a device it is, EyeToy is only going to succeed on the strength of the support it enjoys. It's therefore encouraging to see industry stalwart Sega getting in on the act by appropriating some of its biggest franchises for motion- sensing treatment. Some 12 minigames should feature in the final game, but the preview version we toyed with offered a fun (if brief) four.

Perhaps the most obvious transition, *Samba De Amigo* replaces the maracas with hand movements and therefore does little to alter the already great play mechanic. *The House Of The Dead* has you slapping waves of zombies away before confronting a tenacious boss, although the latter is also dispatched with a series of well-placed air smacks. Meanwhile, *Sonic The Hedgehog* sees you controlling the speedy mascot down a 'bonus' tunnel by moving your hand, collecting rings and gems while avoiding spike balls. And, in a particularly convincing deployment of the EyeToy technology, *Virtua Fighter* squares you up to Akira whose attacks you must block while exploiting opportunities to hit back

As with all EyeToy undertakings, there could be an argument for further refinement, but on current indication the potential for great party-game material seems completely assured.





After months of maraca frustration, EyeToy *Samba* is a successful replacement. Precise and instinctive, the freedom from cables encourages extreme *Samba* freestyling

U Move Super Sports

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house
Origin: Japan
Release: Out Now (Japan) September

Konami launches EyeToy's first spanking game. But save your blushes, because fun doesn't come any purer than this

U *Move Super Sports* might just be the most vibrantly designed game of the year – so far, at least. EyeToy games aren't usually noted for their visuals (unless you happen to be a supermodel) so it's a happy surprise to find so much artistry and invention in the characters that cavort around you as bounce, bat and barge your way through Konami's bizarre decathlon.

The game's main innovation is how it positions your image on the screen relative to each particular task. Select a baseball game and you'll be positioned top left, with ample space to grab an umbrella as an impromptu bat. Horse riding perches you astride a fat-tongued steed, walloping your own backside to spur it on.

Also included are a suite of abstract sandbox games which turn your EyeToy into a kaleidoscope or a slide-puzzle generator. One requires you to incite a desperately dejected flower to dance: failure is simply too heartbreaking to contemplate. Another turns your image into a bunch of sliding tiles, feet and head amputated like a magician's assistant. It's a generous package, but as of yet only a few of the games have been fully optimised and polished. EyeToy has felt a little becalmed since *Play*'s triumph last year. *U Move* could be just the thing to reinvigorate it.







The resounding thwack as you hit each baseball does a surprisingly effective job of convincing you that there's real contact between your real bat – or umbrella – and the virtual ball





Pinball ought to be one of the game's best ideas, but having to use both arms for each paddle is both frustrating and unintuitive

World Of WarCraft

It all started with orcs and humans, but now everybody's invited to Blizzard's flagship universe



The Alliance – humans, dwarves, gnomes and night elves – has proved a more popular choice than the Horde's orcs, trolls and tauren (though the fourth Horde race, the undead, are well represented). In the Alliance, gnomes are unfairly unappreciated

World Of WarCraft is big. That much could be expected from a developer whose games routinely pull in more preorders than many titles ever sell, but Blizzard's entry into the new wave of massively multiplayer titles casts a long shadow. The beta launch saw *WOW* fansites across the internet collapse in domino sequence under an avalanche of information-starved hits; there are 'US beta testers' with IP addresses from Argentina to the Ukraine; and at the time of writing there are accounts for sale on Ebay with bids at US$350 (apparently it's a slow period).

Big in other senses, too: this is the result of four years of Blizzard's notoriously meticulous production, converging *WarCraft*'s extensive backstory and the developer's previous experience with online multiplayer into a new look at a familiar world. That familiarity doesn't necessarily have to stem from experience with *WOW*'s forebears – although Blizzard has helpfully provided a storyline synopsis on its website for newcomers – more if you ever had a soft spot for high fantasy.

WOW's visuals are a celebration of the genre, all exaggerated proportions and towering scale under a painted sky. It's an effective counterpoint to *EQ2*'s rendering of a fantastic world in a realistic fashion, just as jaw-dropping in its splendour, and possibly even more virtual life-affirming in its artistry.

There's an immediacy of experience here that allows players to reap rewards from only an hour's play as opposed to 12-hour marathons



Though players are given ample time to enjoy the dense scenery, it's not as a side-effect of the paralysing grind that has turned many away from MMOs past. There's an immediacy of experience here that allows players to reap rewards from only an hour's play as opposed to 12-hour marathons: although given Blizzard's fiendishly precise appreciation of how to deliver addictive content, this is much like saying you can enjoy a bar of chocolate from eating only the first piece. Quests seldom conclude far from a lead into three more, a trainer offering a new skill and an unexplored vista just beyond the next ridge – all enticingly achievable if you were to put in just a little more time.

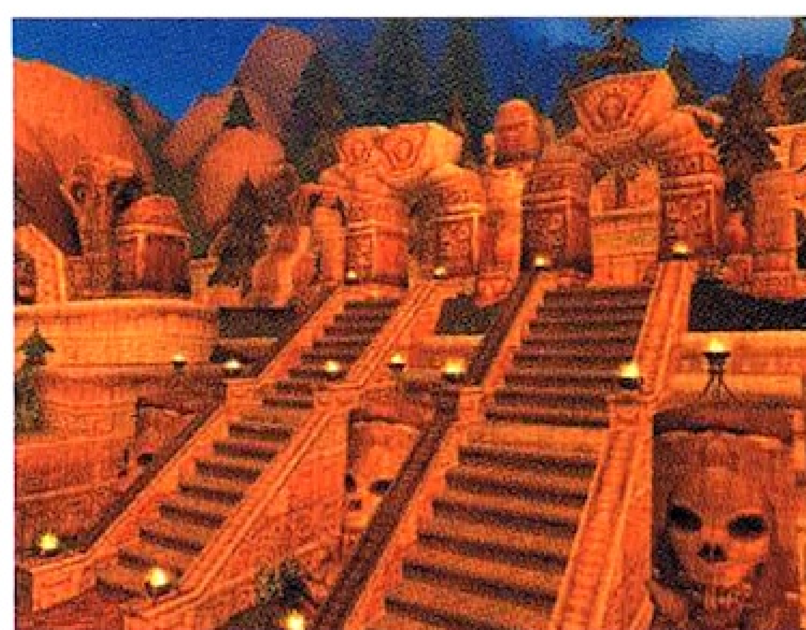
This pace is aided considerably by *WOW*'s energetic combat, which follows the traditional MMO structure of a rhythmic trading of blows, but is so up-tempo as to suggest an action-RPG (not least *Diablo*). Strategy comes from recognising the right moment to counteract an enemy skill or launch your own without risk of interruption, and class-specific mechanics lend further tactical considerations.

Warriors, for example, must build up a 'rage' level through giving and receiving damage in order to power their combat skills, whereas the Rogue attacks form cascading combos that build up to finishing moves. The basic spellcasters fall back on the familiar battle plan of keeping foes at a polite distance while pelting them with eldritch harm, but more complicated magical classes have correspondingly eccentric behaviour – such as Shamans, who create totems on the landscape to provide magical effects. Further variation in characters' combat ability is provided by the Talent system, a hierarchy of modifiers – and ultimately new abilities – that allow specialisation beyond the already dense skill trees.

Currently only the Warrior and Mage classes have their Talents in place, with the others to be phased in over the course of the beta; also to be implemented is the much-demanded ninth character class, the Hunter, which has the ability to tame wild beasts as animal companions.

Even with these omissions, the hype that *WOW* already feels like a finished game isn't completely unfounded – what's most obviously still in the process of development isn't so much the world (though the beta will





The world's hand-drawn grandeur comes across well in screens, but in-game it's lent a startling sense of scale and distance

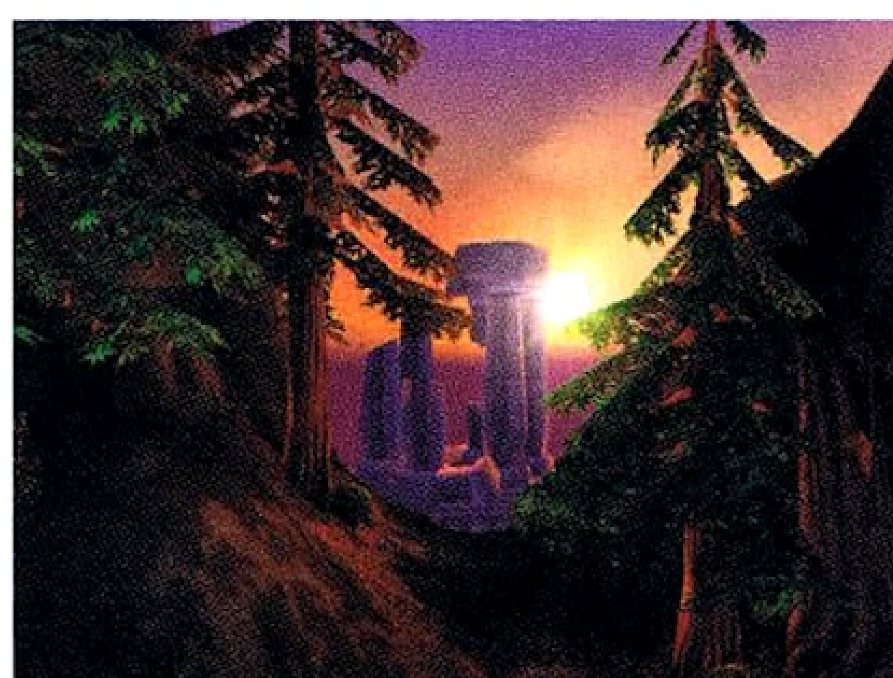




Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Vivendi**
Developer: **Blizzard**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q4 2004**













naturally shape it further), but the interaction of the players within it, at least on the player-vs-player servers.

PvP is a necessary demand of both the fanbase and the *WarCraft* universe, which sees the Horde and Alliance factions at loggerheads. The current system has seen towns effectively shut down by high-level groups destroying NPCs, important quest destinations staked out by players preying on unsuspecting pilgrims, and powerful characters being near-unassailable even when outnumbered by slighter opponents. Though the first two are at least thematically fitting, it's an area of huge contention and may be Blizzard's trickiest balancing act.

However it resolves the war, there's certainly no shortage of craft.







There's no shortage of AI combatants in Azeroth, but for many the thrill of duelling other players is *WOW*'s draw

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

A gap is already opening up in the pre-Christmas release schedule as terrified competitors back away. It can only be the return of GTA



Shooting from the pillion of a motorcycle at an SUV certainly adds a new gameplay slant to the *GTA* canon. These rural areas have a slight *Smuggler's Run* feel, and there are vast expanses to explore



Sony must be desperate for *San Andreas* to finally appear. There is no doubt that *GTA* games shift PlayStation2 consoles, and the lack of one in 2003 was keenly felt. Thankfully, despite the pressure of another lucrative exclusivity deal, Rockstar is staying true to the type of game it wants to make.

The initial setting – a neighbourhood based on South Central Los Angeles in the early '90s – doesn't court massmarket acceptance, but it does exude requisite levels of cool. Watch Boyz N The Hood or Menace 2 Society, listen to Dr Dre's The Chronic or Tupac's Thug Life Volume One and you've got the drift. Hustlers wear plaid shirts and sock hats with AKs stuffed into the bands of their sweatpants. The way that Rockstar has captured the lazy menace of LA street life, all smog-filtered haze and stoned G-funk, makes for an intriguing scenario.

Your character, CJ, has just returned to Los Santos (Rockstar's reimagining of LA) following the death of his mother. He finds his old crew, the Orange Grove Families, in decline, and his neighbourhood overrun by drugs peddled by rival gangs. Here begins the rebuilding of a criminal empire that will eventually encompass the whole state of San Andreas.

New features, as demonstrated by the opening series of missions in and around CJ's hood, include the ability to hijack BMXes, the satisfying animation showing CJ rocking from side to side as he pumps the pedals uphill or swings a leg out to get round a corner. CJ can get a haircut, or a new outfit, or alter his figure through over-eating and exercising, and all these choices will affect the way he is treated by his friends, rival gang members and the bent cops forever on his case. One mission requires you to perform a four-man drive-by. Another has you shooting at cop cars through your back windscreen or shaking motorcycle police off your bonnet after a tip-off at a gang meet. Rockstar appears to have rectified one of the biggest gripes affecting the *GTA* series since it went 3D, namely gunplay. The fact that you can now strafe while aiming in thirdperson, or choose between manual and auto aiming with all weapons, means that *San Andreas* can shed a little of its reliance on driving missions. Firefights are far from realistic showdowns – though this has never been the *GTA* way. At least now they are more thrilling, strategic and don't automatically make you simply want to nick a car and run everyone over.

Every time you fire a shot or steal a car, CJ's statistics are upgraded. This lends an invisible RPG element to the gameplay – the more you perform a certain action, the better

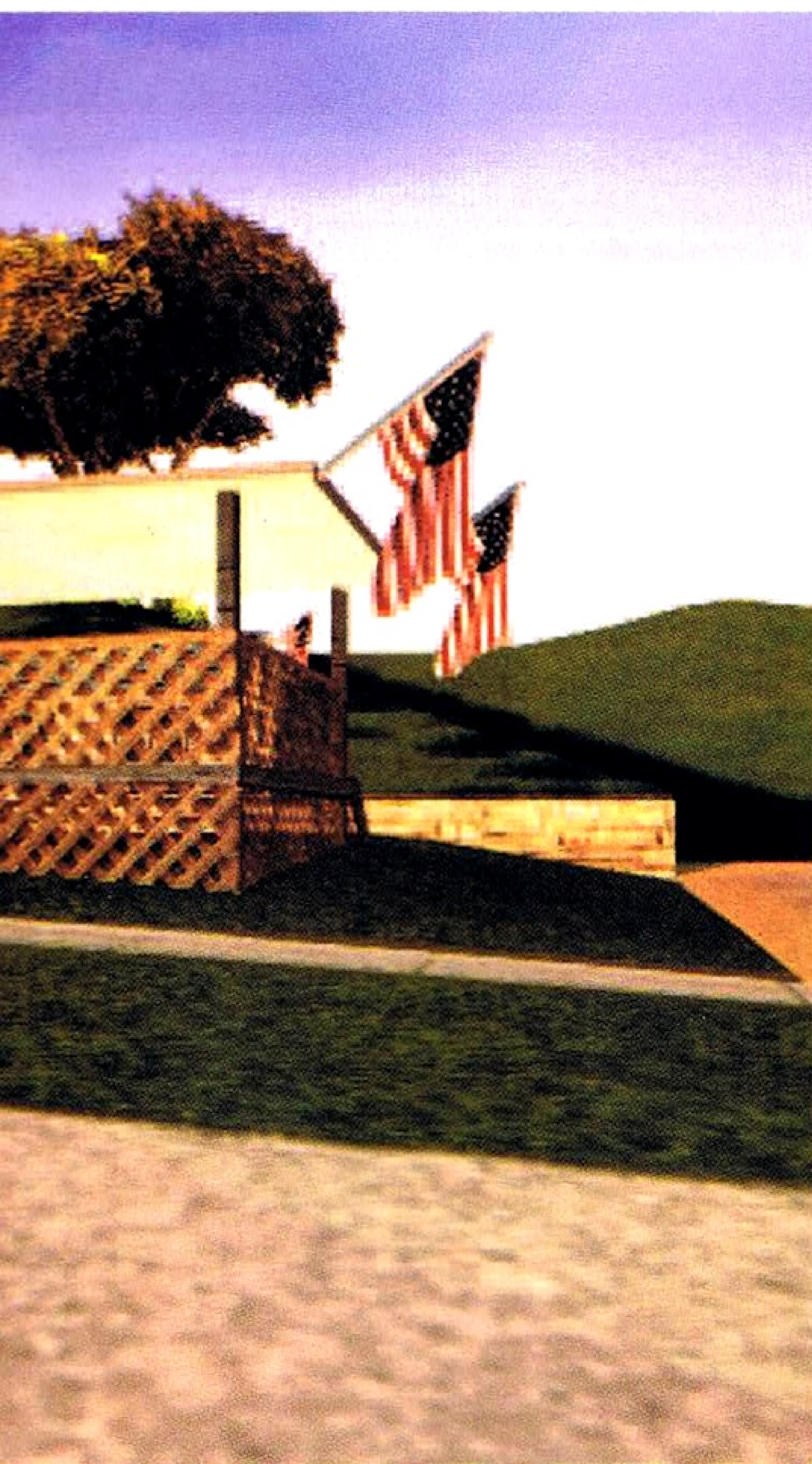
One mission requires you to perform a four-man drive-by. Another has you shooting at cop cars through your back windscreen





San Andreas' rural environments are a departure for the series. Draw distance looks good, with no evidence so far of fogging, but whether this fidelity is seen in the final game remains to be seen

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Rockstar
Developer: Rockstar North
Origin: UK
Release: November









Bikes are set to be the new PCJs, it seems. Whether or not Rockstar plans to convert *San Andreas* into one gigantic Tony Hawk-style stunt park is unknown, but this would be typical of the freedom of movement that the *GTA* games engender

CJ will become at it. Along with the cosmetic personality enhancements provided by haircuts and the like, different players will reach the latter stages of the game with very different CJs, depending on the choices they've made.

All this can be discovered within eight blocks of downtown Los Santos. Ultimately there are three huge cities to explore, not to mention the rural areas in between. The countryside here amounts to much more than cursory linking scenery. A whole rustic identity has been forged, comprising farmsteads and log cabins, sleepy one-horse towns and trailer parks. Take a trip in the dodo and you can see just how amazingly expansive the environment really is: you can fly for minutes and not see another settlement. Traversing the environment on ground level with one of the all-new vehicles such as the quad bike or the monster truck, it becomes obvious that this isn't just empty space. There are side missions to discover down every dirt track.

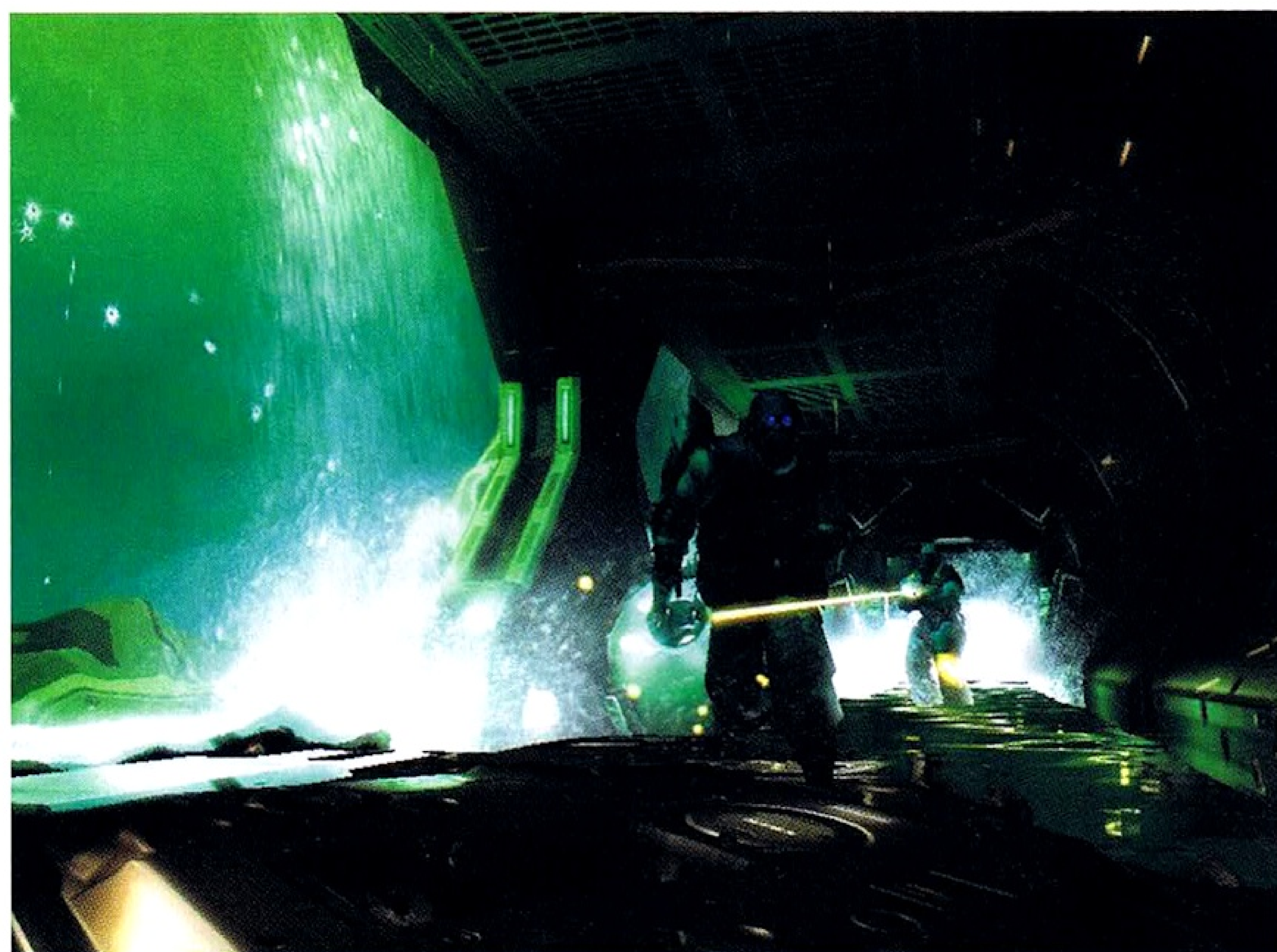
Small towns, such as the upwardly mobile Dillimore, have their own personality, their own gangs of hoodlums and their own opportunities – stealing an articulated petrol tanker from a gas station and then attempting to outrun the local vigilantes, for example. There's even a half-mile-high mountain for you to climb.

Where most story-based games follow a linear path from A to B, those in *San Andreas* expand outwards until A simply becomes a tiny dot in the vast expanse of B. We haven't even seen San Fierro (San Francisco), Las Venturas (Las Vegas), the desert or the beach yet. Surface barely scratched, it's obvious that *San Andreas* is a mighty prospect. In the two years since *Vice City*, no other developer has come close to snatching the mantle from Rockstar in the driving/action/crime/free-roaming-city stakes; just look at the recent dismal failure of *Driver 3* to expand its empire. Take a deep breath, because *San Andreas* looks like it'll be *big*.



Pariah

Unreal's creator returns with a new FPS vision and a secret weapon – and it's one you won't spend the game looking down the sights of





The developer still has an eye for striking imagery, from shootouts in the rising flood to the hunchbacked dropships' insectile menace. Visually, *Pariah* looks to reprise the splendour of *Unreal*

"Too many games have crap stories," observes **James Schmalz**, Digital Extremes' founder and creative director. "Especially firstperson shooters, and we want to break that mould – love it or hate it, we've got a story you'll remember."

Tough talk for any game, let alone an FPS, but *Pariah* marks DE's first attempt to step out of the shadow it cast for itself with the original *Unreal*. Where that game would certainly showcase a talent for memorable event-driven narrative, its new title hopes to repeat the coup with a character-driven one.

> "It's fun to be sneaking in corridors gunning down your enemies, and fun as hell to be flying over sand dunes in your three-wheeler"





Pariah's multiplayer will largely ignore the subtleties of the singleplayer game in favour of fast action, but Schmalz promises "a couple of brand new game types" in addition to standard modes

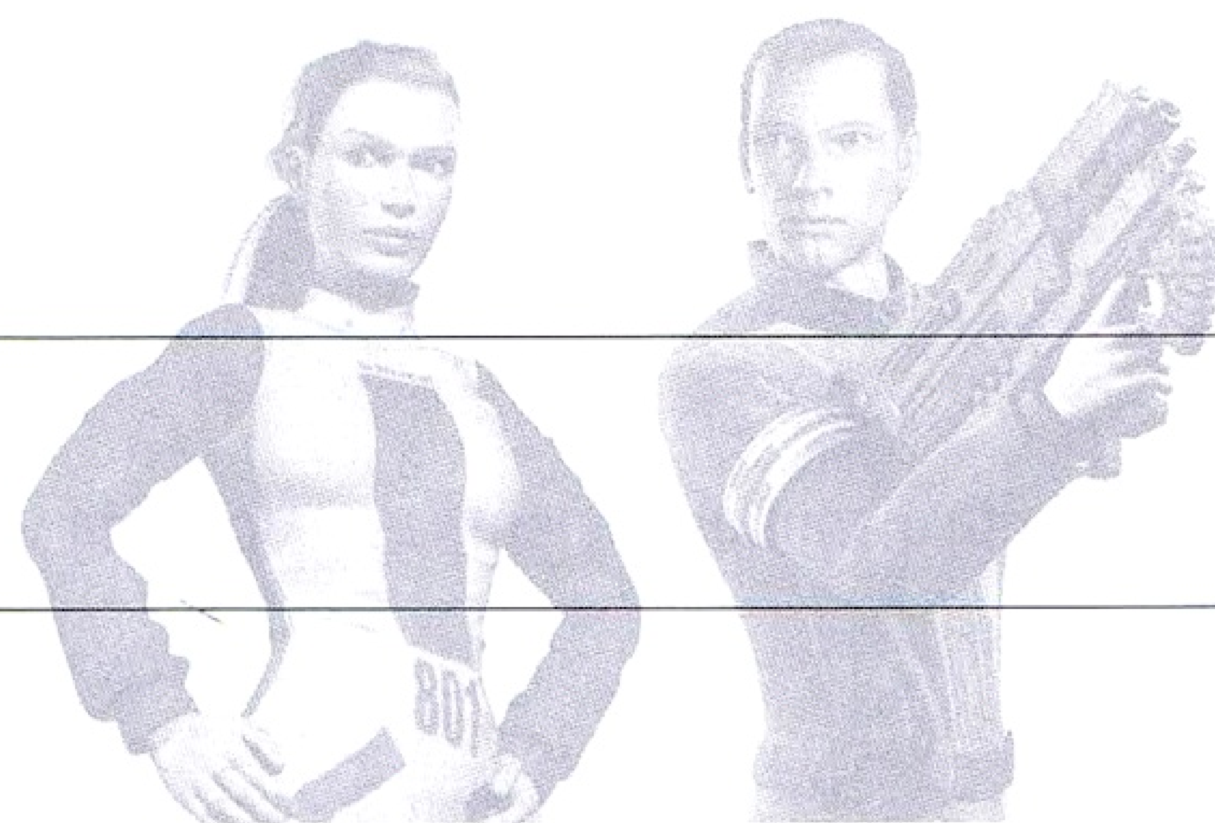
Set on the penal wasteland of a derelict future Earth, the player assumes the slumped shoulders of disgraced military doctor Jack Mason, sent to recover prisoner Karina J and escort her off-world. As could be expected, the extraction goes disastrously wrong, leaving Mason and Karina on the run from both the military and the inmates.

With his bruised eyes, receding hairline and bad skin, Mason is one of the most fascinatingly vulnerable protagonists this side of *Silent Hill*. His lack of combat training will apparently have an effect on gameplay, but it's unlikely to be a marked one – the genre, after all, suggests even a physics PhD with Coke-bottle glasses can reload a combat shotgun like a pro. Mason's initial effectiveness in firefights, though, could easily be outclassed by that of his charge.

Karina should prove more than capable of holding her own, thanks to the foundation provided by the bot AI from *Unreal Championship*: surely the acid test of response to riot situations. But even if that sidesteps (or circle-strafes) some of the potential pitfalls of guiding a companion NPC through the game, the challenge is to simulate a believable character, not just a deathmatch player. "It's definitely been a concern of ours, and we've addressed it simply through brute force," says Schmalz. "She has a massive amount of animations and dialogue [and] we've spent a huge amount of time on her AI."

Much of the game will take place in sprawling outdoor areas, with the action occasionally brought into tighter confines. "We wanted to give the player a wide variety of completely different sections, and also take advantage of each environment to affect gameplay," Schmalz explains. "So it's fun to be sneaking in dark corridors gunning down your enemies, and fun as hell to be flying over sand dunes in your Wasp three-wheeler."

Sections intended for vehicles have been



Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Hip Interactive
Developer: Digital Extemes
Origin: US
Release: 2005















arranged as physics toyboxes, with objects to collide with and scatter (including unfortunate pedestrian enemies) and jumps to take. Even so, the player is free to attempt them on foot, although the suggestion leaves Schmalz nonplussed: "You can run through those sections, if you like. But it's just not as fun."

With all the engine-flexing on display, in addition to a level editor (it's unclear if this will feature in Pseudo Interactive's PS2 port) and multiplayer support, it's interesting that DE is so eager to talk up the storyline. Although not talk *about*, perhaps necessitated by its evolution during the course of development: Schmalz mentions that the team is on the fifth draft, and that components of the game have changed with each revision to ensure they are intertwined. "The most difficult thing has been developing and integrating the story well – it's much more than a justification of the singleplayer context. We're quite singleplayer focused, although the multiplayer has gotten a lot of good attention."

In concept, at least, it is fresh evidence that a genre often accused of encouraging lazy copycatting is in fact enjoying a new wave of confidence among developers, a sensation DE is well aware of. "It's great to see games like *Riddick*, *Far Cry* and *BF1942* pushing new ideas," agrees Schmalz. "And we just started playing *Doom 3*, which is a hell of a lot of fun. Some games push the genre more than others, but it's attracting more and more people and justifying larger and larger games. So it's good for us, and good for the future of FPS games."



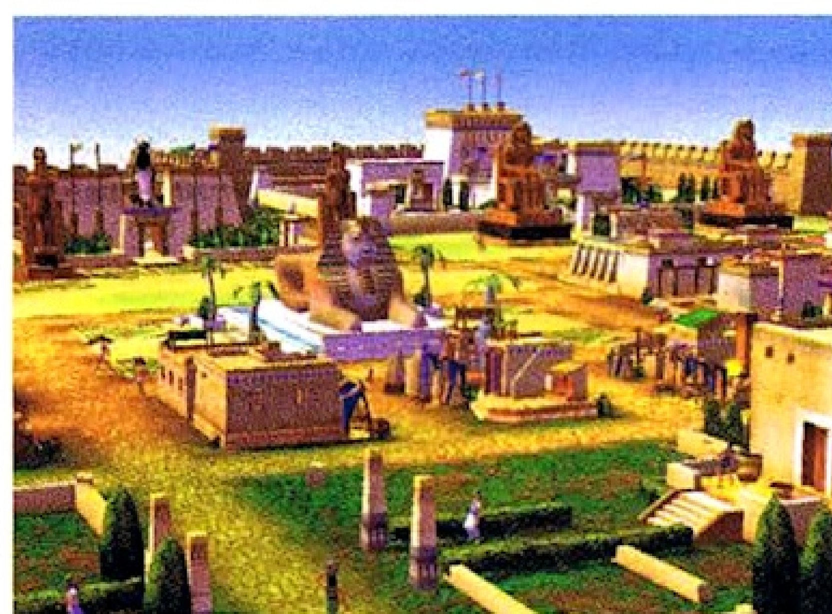
Rather than rely on the good graces of previous doctors to seed *Pariah*'s Earth with medkits, Mason carries a 'healing tool' that can be used at any time. However, excessive dosage causes his vision to blur (left), a nasty side-effect to suffer in the heat of battle

Prescreen Alphas

This month's announcements and updates

Children Of The Nile

Format: PC
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Tilted Mill



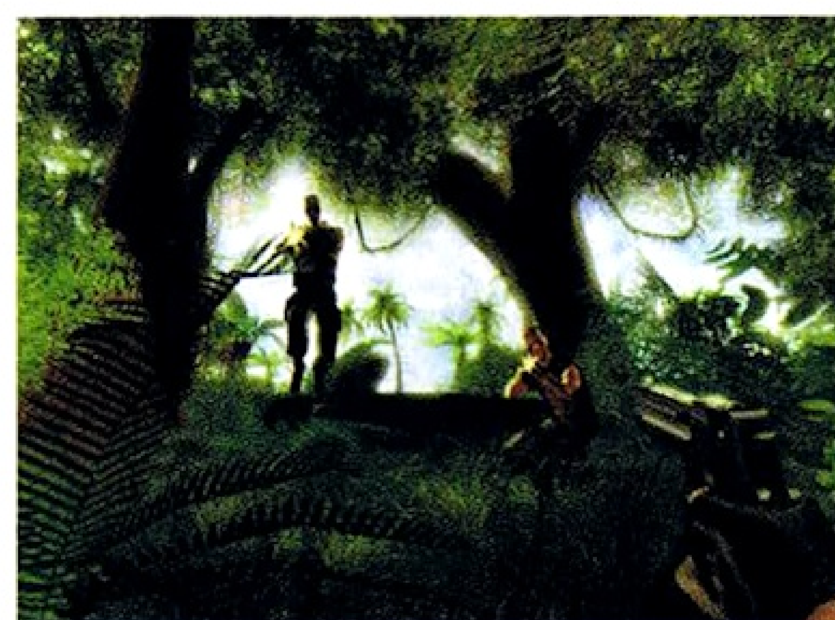


Sega of Europe has picked up this impressively detailed Egyptian city sim from the team behind *Pharaoh*, featuring a *Sims*-style social dynamic along the banks of an authentically modelled Nile

Far Cry Instincts

Format: PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal





Delayed from its end-of-year slot to Q1 2005, *Instincts* will now appear on PS2 in addition to Xbox. It's not yet known if the PS2 version will retain the interesting map-making functionality

Pro Evolution Soccer 4

Format: PC, PS2, Xbox
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house





Not content with representing 136 club sides, 50 national sides and more than 4,500 players, some with individual moves, *Pro Evo 4* also boasts an on-screen referee for the first time

Scrapland

Format: PC, Xbox
Publisher: Enlight
Developer: Mercury Steam

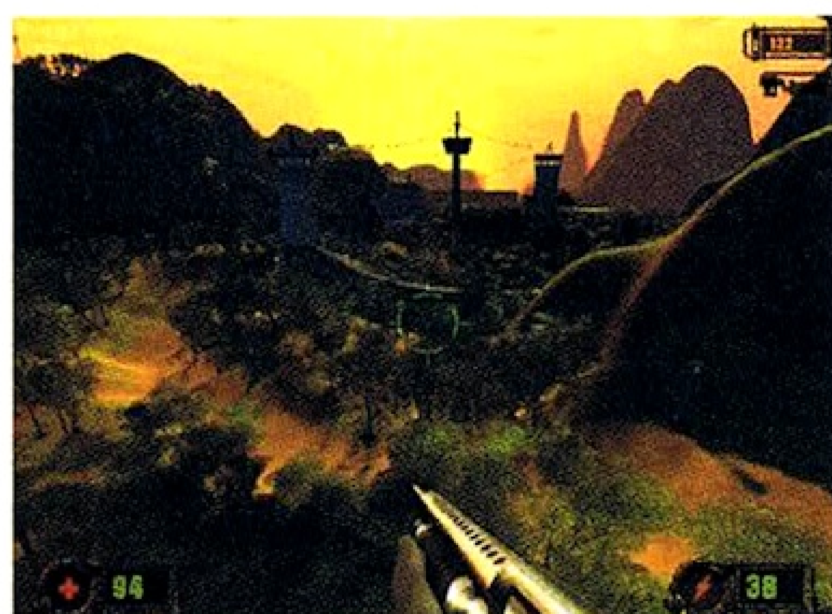




Spanish developer Mercury Steam's '*GTA*-style' project, set in a robotic world, has recently been nudged into the spotlight by American McGee, formerly of id, signing on as executive producer

Vivisector: Beast Inside

Format: PC
Publisher: Brigades
Developer: Action Forms



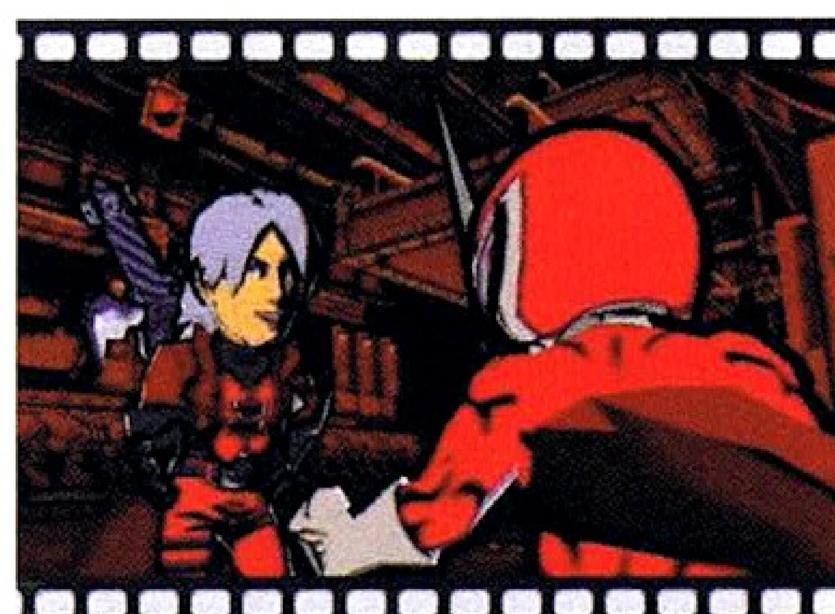


A Ukrainian-developed FPS inspired by HG Wells that pits your special forces soldier against cybernetic mutant animals that have been quietly evolving on an island for 100 years. Expect blood

Viewtiful Joe

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Clover Studio





It's 'just' a port, of course, but a welcome and unusually deft one. Dante fits the aesthetic perfectly, and the inclusion of the easier 'sweet' mode gives the impatient a chance to progress

Guilty Gear Isuka

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sammy
Developer: Arc System Works





The fourplayer fighter that takes the already seizure-inducing *GG* experience even further over the top hits PS2 this month, with new modes and key-wielding artificial girl ABA's debut

Johnny Whatever

Format: Xbox, other formats TBC
Publisher: Warthog
Developer: In-house





Warthog's new title sounds good on paper – punks deliver a dystopian London from the Iron Royals' tyranny – but it remains to be seen if the game can scale the heights of its concept




GUERRILLA


SONY


WITH NETWORK PLAY



Game: Metroid Prime 2: Echoes
Format: GameCube
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Retro Studios
Origin: US
Release: November

FUTURE ECHOES

Samus Aran has arrived on a new planet, bristling with fresh dangers. But what has another Prime got to offer the seasoned space adventurer?

The aperture's mechanism makes a dull shwooshing noise and opens to reveal the great outdoors. Before you lies a sandy pathway flanked by rocky walls. Your view of the landscape is obscured by sun flare oozing into your combat suit's visor, so you take a step forward, and it is obscured by overhanging outcrops, giving you a clear view into the distance of this alien world, all Rodney Matthews colours and weird-looking artefacts. The music, subdued, drawn-out tones aligned to a rhythmic bassline reminiscent of John Carpenter's early-'80s heyday, maintains a steady pace in the background. You step forward once more and scores of bugs, alerted by the presence of foreign feet, rustle and scurry across the ground like a virus going to work on a victim, gone again in an instant as they find new hiding places among the crags. A small shiver worms and wriggles its way down your spine. Then the real threats arrive, bursting from the ground in fizzing showers of dust, and you remember that, conveniently, you've brought along a grab bag of serious firepower…

On the face of it, this could be a sequence snatched from the original *Metroid Prime*, but, when you're actually in the thick of it, navigating its terrains and encountering its indigenous lifeforms, the sequel's differences are clear. *Prime* number two, subtitled *Echoes*, is an even darker game than its predecessor. Everything has been engineered to feel grittier, murkier, more uncomfortable, leaving those who found the *Prime* experience one of isolation and loneliness facing an even less welcoming experience.

Even the simple process of using a lift has a whiff of darkness about it: where before your passage between upper and lower floors was a simple trundle, now you're shunted up and down on more primitive technology, slamming to a halt at your destination with a shudder and a clang. Clearly Retro Studios is attempting to make players feel unsettled, uneasy. The attempts are working.



Darker than dark

As if to underline its dark intentions with a big fat dark marker pen, Retro has actually built a dark world, in which a significant proportion of your mission will take place. And it's this aspect that provides the most obvious difference between *Echoes* and its forefather. Via portals placed at certain points you become sucked into this other realm, which is a kind of twisted copy of Aether, the planet upon which the game is based. The backstory has it that, decades ago, a meteor struck this world, opening some kind of dimensional chasm which spewed up a clone. It is not a perfect replica by any means, and, although Aether has its fair share of hostile creatures, the dark world is home to a selection of altogether more deadly specimens.

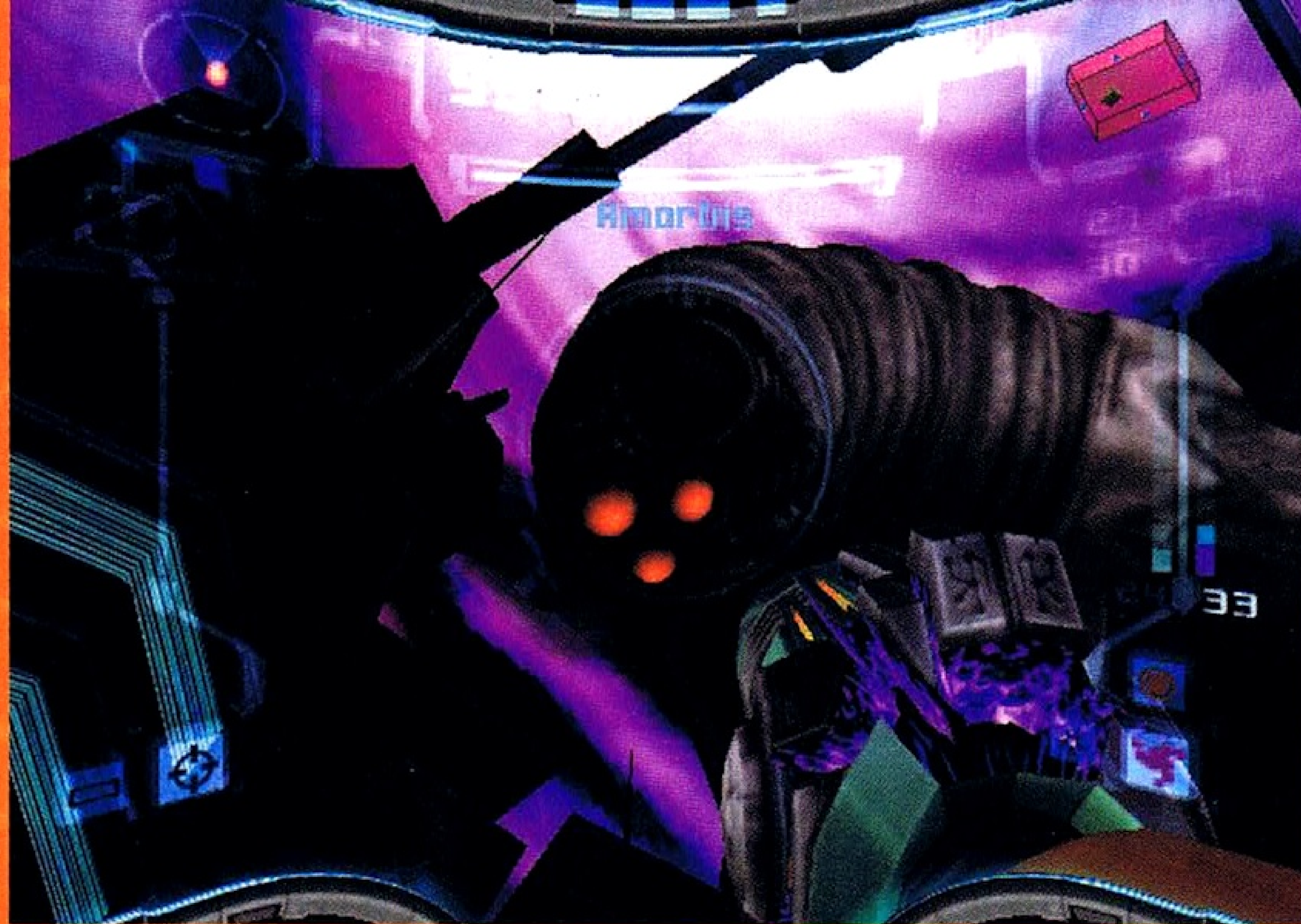
The game involves travelling between the two realms in a manner reminiscent of *Zelda: A Link To The Past* – or so Retro claims, at least (others have attempted to absorb the essence of Link's third adventure, and yet ten years on no one has ever managed it). Apparently, the shadowy facsimile follows largely the same layout as Aether, but allows you to traverse unique pathways to open up previously inaccessible areas of the light world.

We say apparently because we've yet to see how such ambitions pan out: our journey into the dark realm during Nintendo's presentation of the game is limited to a single level. Nevertheless, it gives a clear indication of what life is like on the other side. And it's not very pleasant.

It is, most obviously, dark. Looking around, you realise that you are protected from the environment by a kind of dome-like bubble of light, generated by a glowing crystal at its centre. Stay within this area and you're fine; move beyond it and the environment gnaws away at your energy like a rampaging, invisible disease. It's possible that acquiring a suit later in the game allows passage through such areas unmolested, but for now you simply need to find another crystal. There's one up ahead; shooting it with your light beam (one of several new weapons) energises it for a period, creating another safe umbrella. And so the level progresses as you traverse it, skipping between domes of light… until you encounter the warrior Ings, beings made up of dark matter capable of transforming themselves into oozing globules, like the contents of a particularly nasty lava lamp.

As you'd expect, your light beam makes relatively short work of these enemies. Equally, your dark beam has the yang to efficiently counter the light world's ying. Like missiles, however, each type of weapon requires ammunition, thus ensuring that their use is measured. Clearly this adds another layer of strategy to the game.

Other beam weapons will also become available as the adventure progresses, but of equal importance will be Samus' new selection of visors. The dark visor simply allows you to see enemies that would otherwise appear invisible in the light world (yes, enemies from the dark side will be capable of making the shift, just like you). Its existence is a natural progression from the original *Prime*'s optical enhancements. Less obvious is the echo visor, which, as its name implies, works on audio signals. Certain types of enemy are capable of attacking with otherwise-invisible waves of sound; with the visor in place you're able to locate incoming assaults and take evasive action. As you'd expect, both of these special modes come with their own visual effects, your surroundings remaining the same but quite different, warped with some dizzying effects courtesy of a developer with a solid grip on how Nintendo's technology really ticks.



The dark beam weapon goes to work on a giant worm boss (hint: attack its mouth with the morph ball). *Prime* veterans will appreciate the updated HUD, which counts down precious beam ammo

Certain types of enemy are capable of attacking with sound; with the visor in place you're able to locate incoming assaults



Space pirate commandos are among the tougher grunts in the game, capable of deflecting most beam attacks with shields. Their limited invisibility, meanwhile, necessitates use of the dark visor

The trouble with Metroid

But perhaps we've shot ahead of ourselves. None of this may matter to those who found the original *Prime* just a little too… *distinctive* for their tastes. And quite a few people simply didn't take to Retro's firstperson adventure (it's not a firstperson shooter, remember). Some of these gamers might have been young children who found the game's punishing bosses – and the positioning of save points sometimes necessitating lengthy treks before you

Splitscreen Samus



When Nintendo first showed *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes* at E3 in May, the existence of a multiplayer mode was met with both surprise and consternation. 'How could this ever be a game for more than one person?' went the fanboys' cries. Simply by being entertaining would seem to be the answer.

Nintendo's preview build allowed us access to only one multiplayer level (entitled 'Sidehopper Station', consisting of a smallish, curve-shaped spaceship), but, with four participants, it quickly showed more promise than it has on paper.

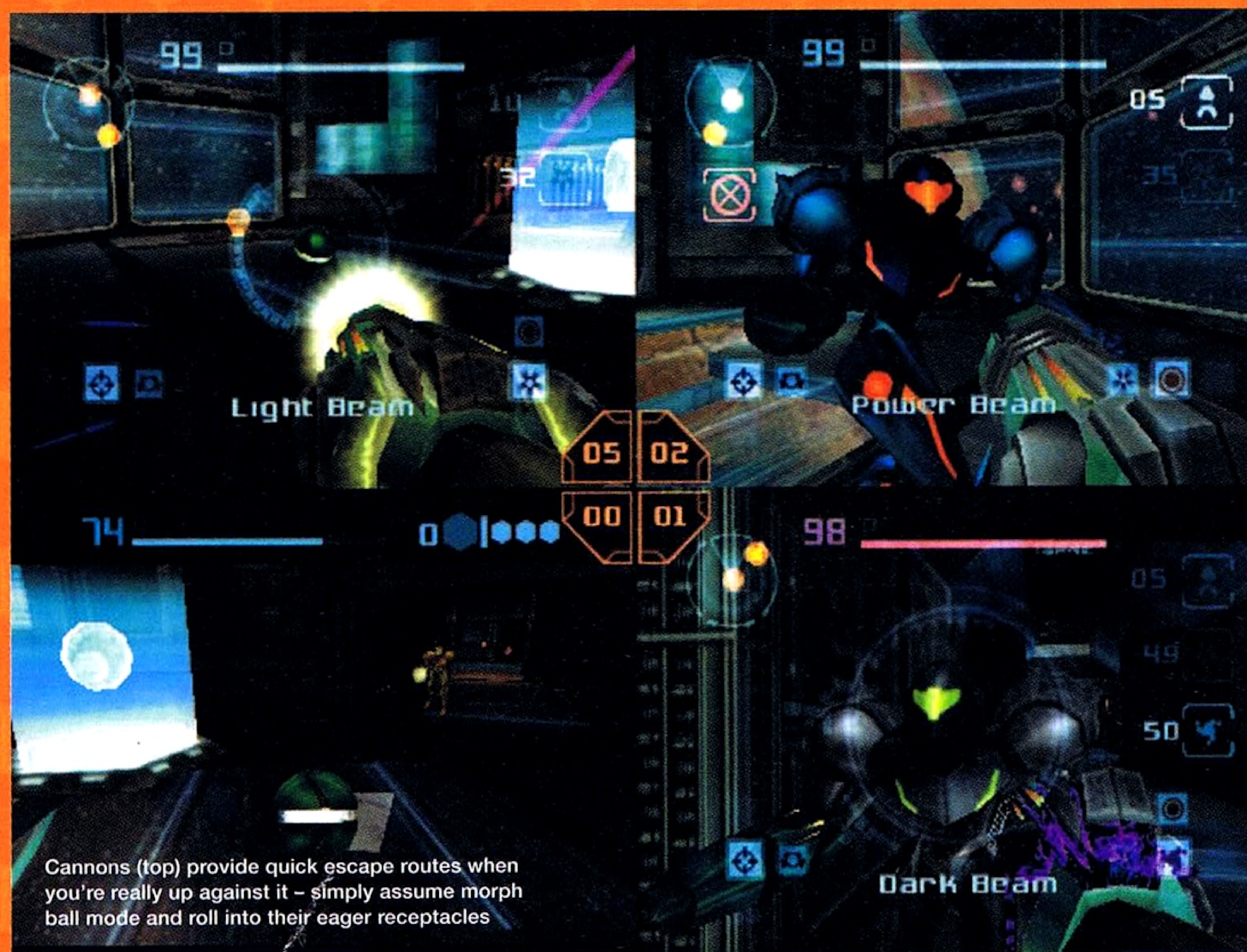
Simply locking on to an adversary and unloading your weapon doesn't work for long, since opponents can dash and use their morph balls to break your lock. Combat therefore becomes a ever-changing mix of targeting, re-targeting, chasing, double-jumping, morphing, evading and so on.

Not forgetting collecting. The environment is strewn with pick-ups, from extra-damage add-ons to invisibility packs, each lasting for only a limited time. Chances are, most deathmatch upgrades you've seen in other firstperson games are represented here, it's just that in other firstperson games you can't morph into a ball, roll into a cannon, and be shot from one side of the level to another like a giant pinball.

These matches are won and lost in the traditional style, but Retro has also included Bounty mode, which isn't so much about kills as it is about collecting currency. Each time you hit someone they drop cash tokens, while getting wiped out sees you dropping all of your acquired stash, leaving it ripe for the plucking by nearby opponents. The round ends when the timer runs down or when someone reaches 500 on their cash total. Both modes provide immediate enjoyment, but whether they'll stand up to repeated play over long periods, *GoldenEye* style, clearly remains to be seen.







Cannons (top) provide quick escape routes when you're really up against it – simply assume morph ball mode and roll into their eager receptacles

Morphing, missiles and more

The first *Metroid Prime* resurrected in a 3D space many of the abilities Samus Aran has previously exploited in 2D, so it's little surprise to see Retro Studios further plundering her back catalogue of twists and turns for the sequel.

Key among them is her screw attack. Not only does this allow Samus to assault enemies in a bunched-up whirl of spinning energy, but it opens up new ways of negotiating certain sections of alien architecture. Those familiar with *Super Metroid* and its numerous shafts which at first prompted much scratching of heads as you contemplated how you might ascend them will probably smile when faced with distant prospects whose platforms initially appear unreachable; entering screw-attack mode allows you to spin in mid-air across yawning areas of terrain, immediately bringing you together with that taunting missile power-up.

But there are elements of the previous game that have been given overhauls, too, such as the spider ball, which is no longer restricted to running along prescribed channels. This time around it's possible to cling to various walls, and even surfaces with uneven properties.

Another update over *Prime 1* is the seeker missile, whose ammo can be launched quickly, one after another, without the annoying pause associated with the original's big projectiles.

It adds up to a store of new toys to play around with.



Retro is attempting to make morph-ball sections more three-dimensional than before. Meanwhile, the screw attack (above right) allows new ways of getting around











These energy domes, powered by twinkling crystals, protect you from the dark world's deadly atmosphere. Effects like these look sensational thanks to Retro's superior GameCube nous

could have another pop following a failed encounter – just a little too hard on both the synapses and patience. Others would be those who simply couldn't get along with the game's unique firstperson control method. Others still – perhaps the biggest group – found the amount of backtracking involved in making progress an awkwardly shaped pill to swallow.

From playing *Metroid Prime 2*, we can tell that the first group should find some comfort here. Just a handful of rockets is enough to take out an enemy gun emplacement the size of a phone box whose initial appearance is enough to make you dive for cover, while our end-of-level encounter with Dark Samus – which amusingly begins with the original Aran and her malevolent clone standing off against each other in a scene that seems ripped out of an old John Woo movie – is something of a walkover. No doubt Retro will crank things up a little for the finished game, but everything points to *Echoes* being a more accessible experience.

No doubt Retro will crank things up for the finished game, but everything points to Echoes being a more accessible experience

The second group will be heartened to learn that Retro is looking into providing a dual-stick control method this time around. It only has a few months to incorporate an alternative to the original's unusual left-stick-and-shoulder-buttons setup, but the massive amount of feedback it's received on the topic since *Prime 1* seems certain to be carrying some sway.

As for the third group of dissatisfied customers, well, they may not find the sequel any more tolerable. After all, the *Metroid* series has always been about slapping down mental Post-It notes as you progress and encounter tantalisingly promising new sections whose quirks seem just a little out of reach, then acquiring new abilities and putting them to work on those previously explored areas, so it hardly seems likely that it's going to change now.

One area of refinement that will find favour with everyone is the new approach to scanning. Environmental elements no longer have a central 'hot spot' that needs to be targeted in order to download relevant information; instead, bringing up your scan visor sees anything assessable in the vicinity assume a coloured outline. Aim your view in its direction and you can proceed with capturing data. It's friendlier than before, and certainly quicker.

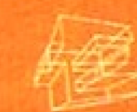
The small matter of hassle involved in working towards that elusive 100 per cent rating has also been addressed. Whereas previously it wasn't immediately clear where you were at in the grand scheme of things, now the scanning visor brings up its own data readout whenever you're focusing on something that counts towards your completion rate. It's another touch that's evidence of a developer really taking notice of feedback on its work.

The same, but different

To those who adored the first *Prime*, this follow-up seems to stab energetically at all the right buttons. But Retro is also attempting to broaden out the *Metroid* experience, not least with a multiplayer mode (see 'Splitscreen Samus') which, contrary to initial impressions, actually seems to add value to the package rather than being something thrown in for the sake of another tick against a feature on the back of the box.

It's certainly the sort of big game Nintendo needs in the run up to Christmas, what with a certain FPS sequel due on Xbox and another crime spree heading for PS2. But, unlike those games in some respects, it is skewed more towards the fan fraternity, that group who revel in idiosyncrasies rather than allow themselves to be repelled by them.

Echoes has the presentation and production values that are hallmarks of the series (the new music is especially strong), but it's trying hard to break some new ground, too. We look forward to exploring the finished article.







Naturally, charging your various beams is possible, and the effects obviously vary. Unleashing a charged dark beam (left) sees it splash on to nearby surfaces as it homes in on enemies. This puzzle-type section (right) requires the use of the dark visor and seeking missiles to pick out the targets

DARK FORCES

A sequel to KOTOR, but not by BioWare. Will the galaxy's last known Jedi live up to expectations?

Knights Of The Old Republic was such a triumph for BioWare that it's not hard to imagine Doctors Muzkya and Zeschuk sheepishly standing in Skywalker and Solo's places at the conclusion of A New Hope. The game's near-unanimous critical and commercial success meant it was little surprise that a sequel would be announced, but more of one that BioWare would not be involved in development. Except, perhaps, to the PC RPG community, who will have watched fledgling developer Obsidian Entertainment with covetous anticipation.

"We started working on *The Sith Lords* before [BioWare] finished *KOTOR*," explains LucasArts producer **Mike Gallo**. "Obsidian is made up of several industry vets who have created a bunch of great RPGs, and BioWare highly recommended them to us."

Those industry veterans – including *The Sith Lords*' producer **Chris Parker** and lead designer **Chris Avellone** – were formerly part of the nucleus of Black Isle, the studio that, alongside BioWare, resurrected the well-flogged corpse of the PC RPG and reaffirmed it as one of the platform's strongest genres. *The Sith Lords*' handover is a continuation of the working relationship between the developers, which previously produced the *Icewind Dale* series and *Planescape: Torment* from BioWare's Infinity engine. It also sees Obsidian following in BioWare's footsteps in terms of building up to original content, as Parker explains: "As a first game, it's perfect. We probably won't try to do an original IP until our second or third game – it takes a lot of R&D time to develop a world, so getting one handed to you takes a lot of background work out of the process."

Not that the prospect of producing a successor to the original game is any less daunting a workload. Obsidian has chosen not to directly continue the original storyline, instead opening five years after *KOTOR*'s







conclusion, in the twilight of the Republic and the inevitable ascendancy of the Sith. Against this ominous backdrop, the player takes on the role of the galaxy's last known Jedi – hunted by the Sith, disconnected from the Force and ostracised by former allies. It's a dramatic set-up that resonates both with Black Isle-era sensibilities and the brooding menace of The Empire Strikes Back. "We do build upon the foundation of the first game, but in many respects *The Sith Lords* is its own story," says Avellone. "Still, if you have played *KOTOR* you'll get more out of it. And you can expect to see a few familiar faces."

Returning players can also affect *The Sith Lords'* universe with the choices they made during the course of the original game. "We originally planned on scanning the hardware to see if there was a *KOTOR* game and how it ended, but this left too many questions open," says Parker. "Ultimately, we decided to let the player tell us how it ended and use their responses as our data." In conversations during *The Sith Lords'* opening chapter, the player is invited to reverse the storytelling dynamic and describe the fate of *KOTOR*'s protagonist to other characters – producing events later in the game that follow their version of events.

This experimental approach to roleplaying, and the narrative content it drives, is the main focus of Obsidian's work on *The Sith Lords*, though Gallo adds that there will be a number of improvements to game mechanics and interface, from ease-of-use tweaks to significant functional changes. "In general, though, we were all extremely happy with the first game," he says, "so a lot of the underlying 'stuff' will remain untouched."

Providing a less tangibly linear story path is another area Avellone hopes to improve over the original. "We're trying to play around with the roleplaying mechanics to provide more reactivity with your companions, in terms of your behaviour influencing theirs. While there will be chokepoints in the narrative, there will be more branching





Game: **KOTOR2: The Sith Lords**
Format: **Xbox/PC**
Publisher: **LucasArts**
Developer: **Obsidian Entertainment**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q4 2004 - Q1 2005**





Lightsaber duels remain an iconic highlight of the game, and your Jedi will benefit from new animation that sees them progress from Luke Skywalker's earnest but frenzied chopping to the martial artistry displayed in the prequels as they gain experience



Playing as a lone Jedi, your companions will obviously be a more earthy band, with unique abilities and weapons to boot







The moon of Dxun's grasslands and generator towers are the most frequently demonstrated of the new worlds, thus far

with the companions and their choices, and from decisions the player makes that echo through the rest of the game."

Such complex interaction was the defining feature of Avellone's work on *Planescape: Torment*, and *The Sith Lords*' cinematic presentation should serve to strengthen its impact – one of the few criticisms of *Torment*'s narrative being its text-heavy delivery. Fears that working under a canon as obsessively scrutinised as Star Wars would leave little room to creatively manoeuvre are thankfully unfounded. "The amount of source material for the era *The Sith Lords* takes place in only amounts to four to six graphic-novel compilations and some slight mentions in other books and games. There's actually a lot of freedom to develop plotlines and characters, more so than I would have thought," explains Avellone. Similarly, the comparatively rigid moral compass of the Star Wars universe and the edgier explorations of behaviour present in Avellone's scripts are not so far apart. "Star Wars tends to deal with iconistic characters – mentor figure, reluctant hero, bad guys that are clearly bad," Avellone begins, "but if you study the movies, you'll notice that there's actually a lot of room to play with personality and morality in the game. Vader, for example, isn't a simple character: he's got some complex motivations going on behind that mask."

All the elements are in place for *The Sith Lords* to be a considerably deeper experience than the original – which will be welcomed by some fans, but could risk upsetting the crossover appeal that *KOTOR* achieved. With many PC gamers openly dismissive of the console RPG as a viable medium for storytelling, it's interesting to find that Avellone is more complimentary: "In general, I think console RPGs consistently deliver more powerful storylines than PC RPGs – I still think *Chrono Trigger* is one of the best RPGs ever. A lot of this is due to the storylines being linear and the characters pre-set, but even so, they tend to use dramatic elements that could easily work in non-linear PC RPGs as well, you just don't see it as much." That said, he admits to being surprised by *KOTOR*'s positive reception among a console audience: "It felt very much like a PC RPG, and I was worried console gamers would freak out. The fact that it did well makes me happy – we'll be keeping the same kind of balance in our game."

"In general, I think console RPGs consistently deliver more powerful storylines than PC RPGs – I still think Chrono Trigger is one of the best RPGs ever"

KOTOR's second episode looks to continue the rehabilitation of Star Wars gaming from its previously fallow run. Flanked by similarly promising titles like *Republic Commando* and *Star Wars: Battlefront*, there could be no better time for another western RPG powerhouse to make its mark on our grandest space opera. "I hadn't really considered that – I mostly just wanted to pilot an AT-ST and blow up my co-workers," muses Parker. "You're right – it's a good time for Star Wars. We're coming up on Episode III, and *KOTOR* really blew the doors off what a Star Wars game was capable of." The hope is that Obsidian's talent can take us through those doors and into the uncharted vastness beyond.



THE DEEP END

Avellone feels the factors preventing console RPGs from attaining the depth expected of 'hardcore' PC RPGs are lack of development time and design staff rather than platform or audience: "It takes a lot of effort to add non-linear missions, choices with consequences, and character development and have all those things impact the game itself in a meaningful way. Black Isle would usually have five or six content designers – not counting two or three junior programmers, tech designers and others – working on the deeper RPGs, and a lot of studios don't have that kind of manpower. At Obsidian we've got five designers, and programming support, on *The Sith Lords* – we're trying to keep the same level of depth we had at Black Isle."





Alert intruder

'Cold in and hot out' – all in a night's work for the light-fingered heroine of slink-action title Stolen, as we learn in a less covert visit to London's Blue52

The Camden-based developer has been keeping quiet on *Stolen* for years, so it's understandable, if daunting, that seven members of the development team are ready to make up for lost time by all talking at once. Still, it would be churlish to complain about too much information when there has been too little for much of the game's life.

Conceived four years ago, and in development for the past two and a half, *Stolen* was outed by European news sites in 2003 as a project supposedly picked up by SCEE on a promising tech demo. It would prove conspicuously absent from successive trade shows until it was reported earlier this year that Sony had dropped the mystery title.

"As a development group making games, we'd never go out with a tech demo: we set up to make games, not technology," refutes Blue52's managing director **Jason Perkins**. "We did get some funding from Sony – at the time they were looking to seed external development in Europe. But the worry for a developer with an original project is that you're going to be fighting for marketing budget, and Hip really liked what we were doing, so it was a no-brainer to go with them."

Hip's recent (re-) announcement of the title has finally lifted *Stolen*'s deep cover, but at a time when stealth is as likely to provoke a groan of resignation as an expectantly held breath.

"The inspiration for the game is the big

Hollywood heist movies – the sneaking, the gadgets," explains Perkins. "When we first came up with the concept there was nothing else that was really using it." Now the game must share the spotlight of a genre with few shadows left unoccupied, but *Stolen*'s hook is reflected in its big-screen muses: this is stealth with a jump-cut, physical urgency. "We're not about passively hiding in shadows and waiting for guards to go past," says producer **Graeme Puttock**, citing a design ethos of 'proactive evasion'.

Prolonged lurking in shadows – or even contact with the floor – is strictly for amateurs in *Stolen*'s near-future-noir. Cat-burgling heroine Anya traverses the rainswept rooftops of Forge City with an easy athleticism that shows up her genre contemporaries as graceless, duck-walking thugs. Indoors, she scrambles up walls, hoists herself along rafters, and springs from shadow to shadow like a caged animal – literally running circles around unsuspecting guards and vaulting or sliding clear of laser tripwires' questing beams.

Acrobatic moves are context sensitive, but lead designer **Bob Churchill** reassures us this is to avoid the sort of multi-button contortions present in *Metal Gear Solid 2*, not as a limiting factor: "It's context-sensitive in the way that it'll happen in the right area, but you'll never see a wall and not be able to climb it, or a ledge that you can't shimmy along." This proves such an open invitation to use every last inch of a room's third dimension that the less-agile inhabitants have required a little executive help, as Puttock recalls: "Originally the first guards carried batons, and we discovered very quickly that due to Anya's athleticism it was easy to stalemate them and leave them stuck beneath you. We armed them, so now at least they can shoot you off."

Refreshingly, Anya herself has no reciprocally lethal response. "We're conscious of the other titles and are deliberately trying to avoid a military feel – there's no stabbing guards or breaking their necks," says project director **Jaid Mindang**. There are, however, ample opportunities to knock them senseless with a surprise punch from the front, a sleeper hold from behind, or to send them spasming to the floor with a taser-like 'neutraliser' dart, but they will recover in time (or when discovered and roused by comrades) and go on the offensive.

"It's kind of an intrinsic part of the gameplay," Mindang continues. "If evasion is something you want the player to engage in, there's got to be a reason why it's better to do that than to just kill everyone." The team hopes to have achieved a balance between brute force never being the ideal solution, but equally never leaving the player backed into a corner that Anya cannot fight her way out of. And, as technical director **Allan Murphy** adds, there's a sensible reason for the non-lethal approach outside of gameplay: "If you went through killing guards in every level, by the end of the game you'd have killed about 40 or 50 people, and then you're a mass-murderer."

And that's just not Anya's style. The



Otherwise-impassable security measures can be briefly shut down by hacking computer terminals. Success in hacking, lockpicking and safecracking requires solving a number of tactile minigames

Game: **Stolen**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Hip Interactive**
Developer: **Blue52**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **March 2005**





purpose here is all of the grand theft with none of the body count: each level focuses on a single, so-called-secure objective, but the player is encouraged to explore and lift targets of opportunity en route. These situations are as often physical puzzles – matching player abilities to environmental cues as was so flamboyantly effected in *Prince Of Persia* – as they are the more familiar territory of playing *Pac-Man* with guard patrols and security cameras. "There's no getting away from the fact that certain mechanics work," says Puttock with regard to the latter, "and that's how it's going to be done until someone comes up with something amazingly different. And then everyone will do it that way for the next three years."

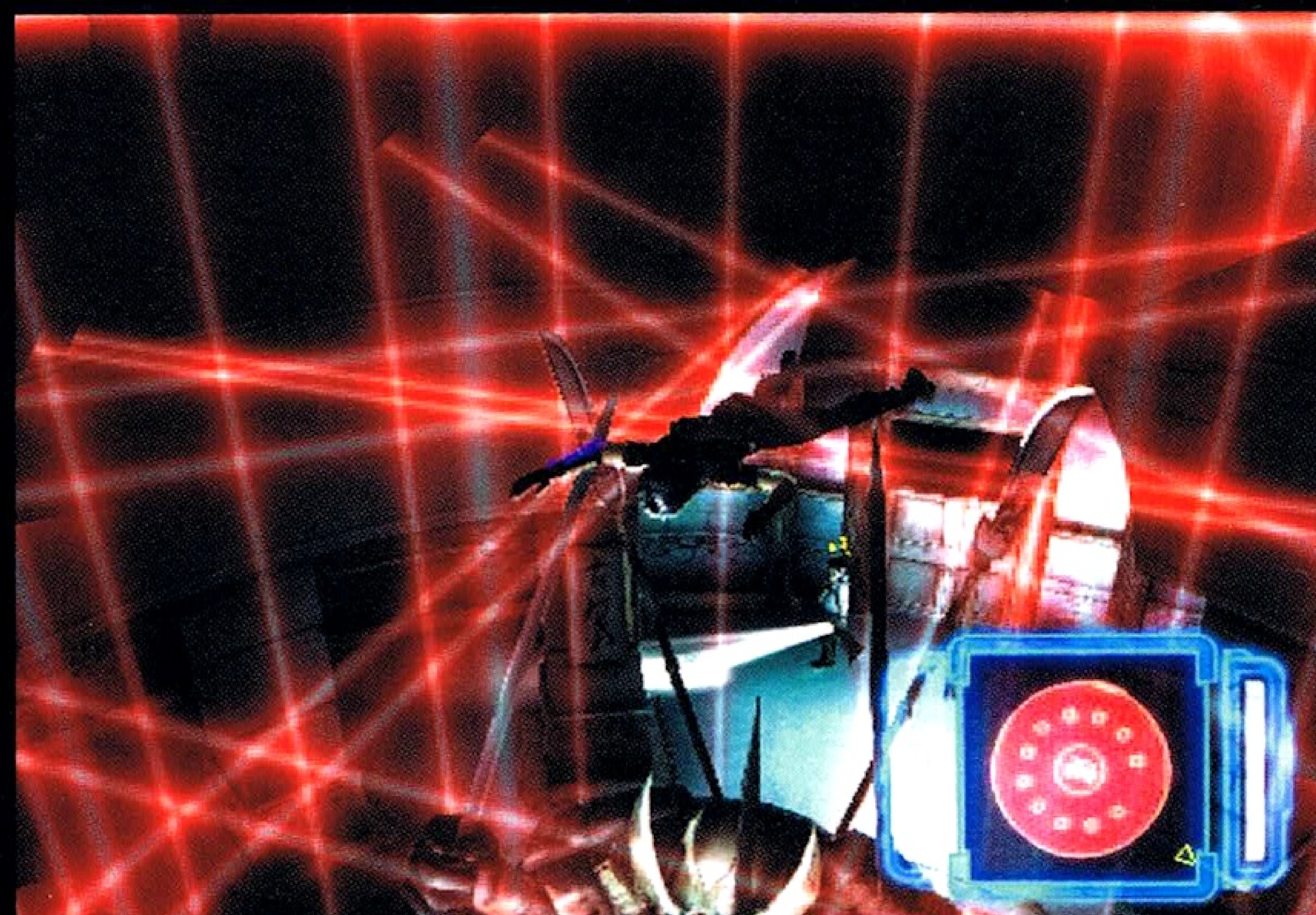
It's unlikely they'll do it with *Stolen*'s visual stylings, though, an appealingly illusory blend of real-world solidity and videogame eccentricity. "The style's certainly evolved through development – it started off quite cartoony, quite manga-like," Mindang begins. "Then the tech came into play," lead artist **Joe Myers** continues, "and suddenly you've got all this realistic lighting, which we didn't have at the start, and that influenced the look."

This interplay between disciplines has continued into the game design itself, as building an 'exaggerated realism' to play off the technical precision of *Stolen*'s light and shadow has steered the team away from modelling a sternly realistic game world. "There've been discussions in the past about things not looking real enough, being too 'gamey'," says Myers, "and in the end we've gone back to putting more 'gamey' things in there." By way of agreement, Perkins refers to the first level's penultimate set-piece, a Mission: Impossible-style free abseil through a cat's cradle of motion sensors: "On the vertical traverse to steal the ruby, there's thousands of lasers, whereas initially we had something that looked artistically correct, with two – one at the top and one at the bottom."

It's apparent even from a fleeting visit that *Stolen* is a smart game – from design decisions as integral as letting you utilise shadows above eye-level, to those as passing but significant as an opening FMV in which all Anya's acrobatics are actually in-game moves. Perkins admits that much of this intelligence comes as the result of painful trial and error: "We'll think: 'That was a really good movie sequence – it should be able to make a really good game sequence', and it turns out it can't. That's been the challenge – and this hasn't been the shortest development in the world – we did develop a lot of stuff that just didn't work as a fun game experience."

Such a critical eye for the final product bodes well for the final stretch of optimising, polishing, and balancing ahead that will determine if these refined and rationalised concepts turn *Stolen* into a flawed gem, or an irresistible payoff. Either outcome has the potential to snatch back the thrill of being able to go everywhere you shouldn't from the joyless clutches of professional assassins. 

"If evasion is something you want the player to engage in, there's got to be a reason why it's better to do that than to just kill everyone"





Guards are not automatically displayed on your map: they must be tagged with a tracking dart first. Avoiding them without omniscient help is a matter of listening for their fairly constant audio cues



MAKING HISTORY

In the mud and rain of a Normandy field, we catch up with Gearbox Software to find out about upcoming WWII shooter Brothers In Arms

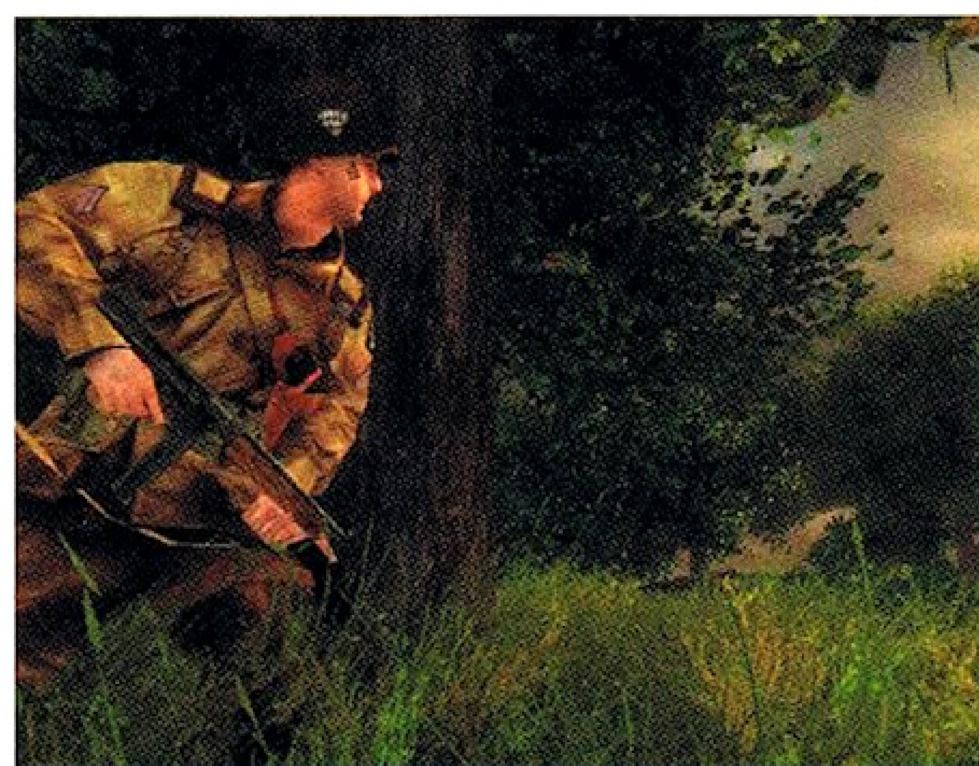
The Utah Beach Museum at Sainte-Marie-du-Mont is the answer. It's the answer to all those questions fired at developers about the morality of making wargames. The questions may be expressed in different ways but they always amount to the same thing: How do you feel about turning a painful, traumatic conflict into entertainment?

Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox Software, uses the Spielberg defence: "We're fulfilling a fantasy, but also retelling a story as authentically as possible. I think it's important that it can remain as a reference piece. Five years ago this would have been too expensive to research, but now the audience is bigger and we can take on projects like this." His enthusiasm for the subject matter and commitment to the project (he spends at least an hour on top of a hill – Hill 30, he tells us – assessing it for the game) gives us hope that his interest in history is not just for the press releases.

The museum is three miles from Utah beach and is in the Normandy town made famous by The Longest Day, the John Wayne movie depicting the descent of paratroopers into a hail of German bullets. A life-sized facsimile of a soldier hangs by a parachute from the church steeple, providing a graphic reminder to tourists of what happened here 60 years ago. Apart from a large American bomber filling up the central hall, it's your typical museum full of artifacts, touchscreen monitors and bored schoolchildren. The kids sidle by, taking little notice of, well, anything. One of them points lazily at a Thompson sub-machine gun while another swings his bag at a fellow pupil to break the tedium. History is not alive here, and even the older visitors look like they've come purely out of a sense of duty.

Bringing this rich history to life for a new generation is only one of Pitchford's objectives: the good news is that *Brothers* ...



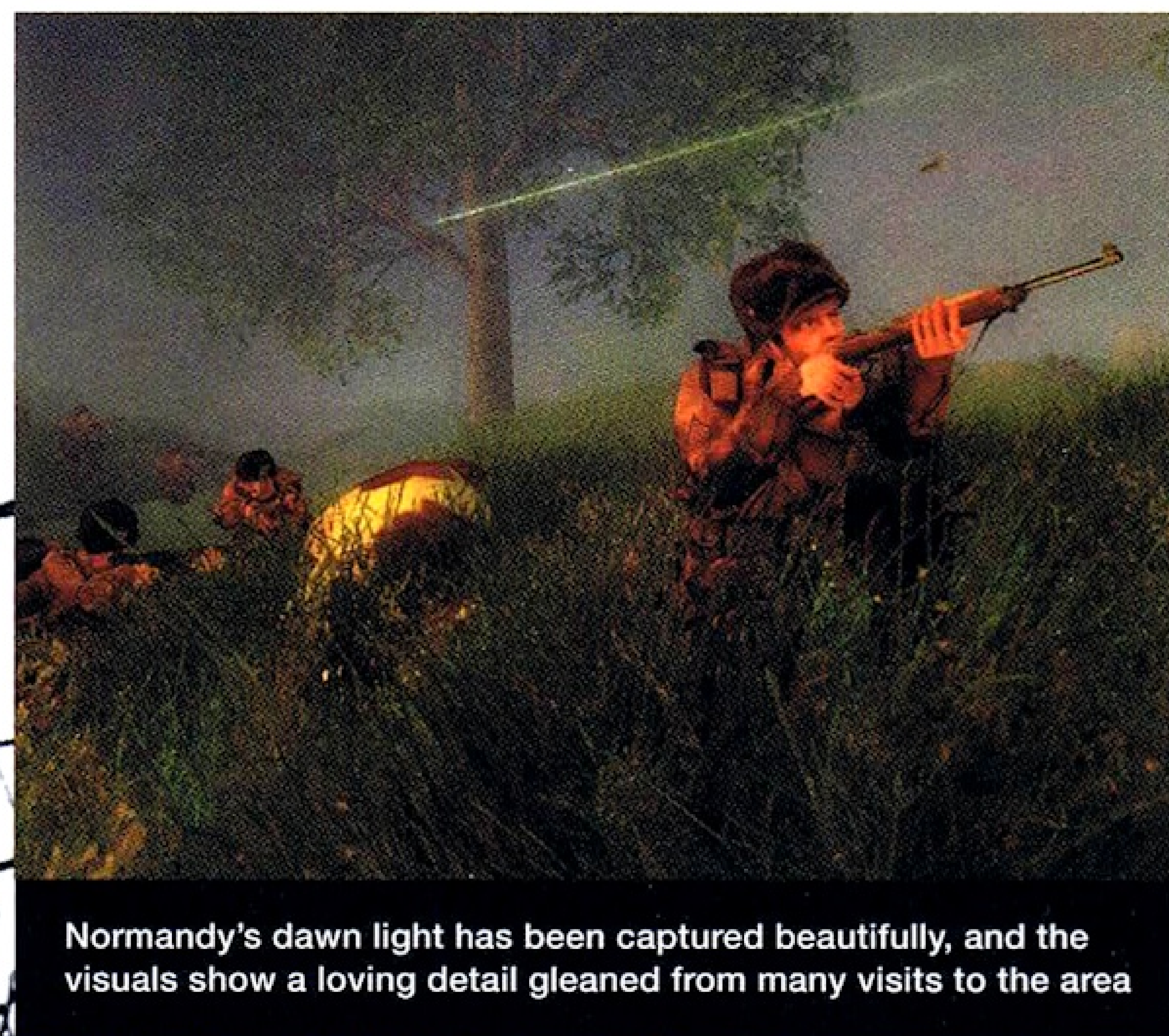




Randy Pitchford (left) employed ex-Colonel John Antal to advise on military strategy. One of these men has a very firm handshake







Normandy's dawn light has been captured beautifully, and the visuals show a loving detail gleaned from many visits to the area

Arms does detail like no other war game we've encountered. Where *Medal Of Honor Frontline* gives you a prosaic version of the Omaha beach landing (which took place 12 miles from Utah beach) and then veers off into a Boys' Own adventure, *Brothers In Arms* sticks to the broad historical facts. It takes place over an eight-day period and reprises the major conflicts fought by 3rd squad, 3rd platoon of the 502nd airborne division during the invasion.

It's also odd because you get to see the invasion happen from an unusual perspective. As part of a paratrooper division, you land in the fields behind the enemy front line. Your job is to fight your way towards the allied forces, destroying and securing strategic points on the way and thus providing support to the thousands of troops fighting their way up Utah beach.

Your first task, however, is to find your scattered comrades before avoiding detection by the enemy and securing the exits of the four roads leading to the beach. The murkiness of the Normandy countryside coupled with the superb ambient sound effects make for an incredibly tense insertion. Hedgerows loom out of the dark and as you run to take cover from stray bullets pinging around you the sound of your heavy breathing ramps up the tension further. *Brothers In Arms* is not short on atmosphere.

Character building

Many of the higher-ranking soldiers in the game will be modelled on their historical counterparts, right down to facial features, name and accent – but the character you control, Sergeant Baker, and his men will be fictional. This was necessary to allow some artistic freedom but also out of respect for those individuals who fought and died during the Normandy invasion. "*Brothers In Arms* is based on a true story and it's the first action game to really put you on the real battlefields," continues Pitchford. "It's not just a corridor shooter with artwork that places it within a theme like you've played before. *Brothers In Arms* is the first team-based firstperson action game set in the period. It puts you in the boots of a paratrooper for eight days during the most important battle of modern history." Indeed, the 502nd parachute regiment is distinguished as the only squad to participate in every major action of the campaign.

Character texture is brought out through the conversations that take place between Baker and the dozen men under his command. Baker is at first reluctant to face the responsibility of taking young men into battle (a theme also present in Saving Private Ryan) but the other troopers also have to deal with personal issues amid the mess of war as they move from battle to battle. These vignettes are played out with subtlety and should provide even more motivation for astute tactical decision making in the field.







An early mission tasks you with fighting your way to Utah beach to meet up with troops from the landing

Format: Xbox/PC
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Gearbox
Origin: US
Release: 2005



A C-47 'Gooney Bird' now rests in the Utah Beach Museum at Saint-Marie-du-Mont. Over 1,000 of these dropped paratroopers behind enemy lines on D-Day



'Veracity' is the word of the day as Pitchford drives around Normandy from one location to another pointing out key areas that appear in the game. He rattles them off with boundless excitement: Purple Heart Lane, Hill 30, Dead Man's Corner, Carentan. Along with eyewitness accounts, delving into archives and dispatching a team to survey the local area, Gearbox also enlisted the help of **Colonel John Antal**, formerly of the US army. Now the company's military and historical director, he travels with us to add tactical depth to Pitchford's exposition of what, why and when.

There's little doubt that Gearbox is taking a brave decision by sticking to the historical truth, at least as far as it's outlined in the history books. "Military tactics haven't changed that dramatically over time," Antal tells us. "It's first about finding the enemy, then fixing the enemy, then flanking the enemy. Flanking really means something in this game. If you can attack an enemy from an unexpected direction then you create two things: confusion and fear."

"IT'S FIRST ABOUT FINDING THE ENEMY, THEN FIXING THE ENEMY, THEN FLANKING THE ENEMY"

But won't the focus on historical accuracy compromise the player's freedom? "Actually, recreating the battlefields gives the player more freedom than he's been allowed in the corridor shooters that have come before," argues Pitchford. "On a real battlefield you aren't just funnelled down a path, but you have options about how to proceed tactically. You can charge up the middle, or you can set up for a flanking manoeuvre around one side or another. There are several things that happen by using real battlefields, but mainly it's to give you tactical freedom."

Gearbox's work with the PC version of *Halo* is apt because you can imagine how it could work in a WWII game. Each mission drops you into a battle area and gives you an objective. Unlike most FPSs, there's no tight path channelling you from A to B – battles in *Brothers In Arms* are mainly about the suppression and flanking of an enemy force. Antal explains that it's the most fundamental and powerful manoeuvre in military history. While there will be areas where you're pinned down and movement is restricted, such as Purple Heart Lane, many missions will give you the freedom to change tactics on the fly and the





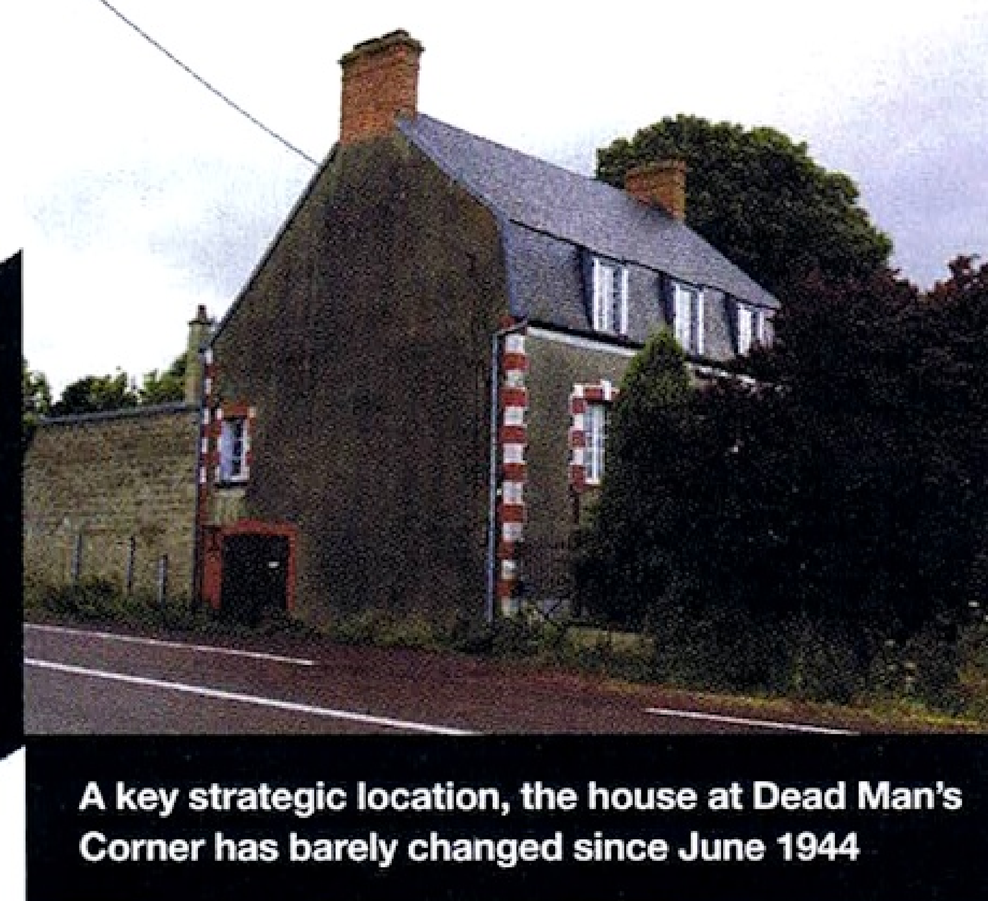
The two fire teams in your squad can be selected with the white and black buttons, while on-screen icons and context-sensitive commands efficiently marshal them around the battlefield. Flanking is crucial to success










A key strategic location, the house at Dead Man's Corner has barely changed since June 1944

space to outmanoeuvre enemies across large expanses of land. At least that's the theory.

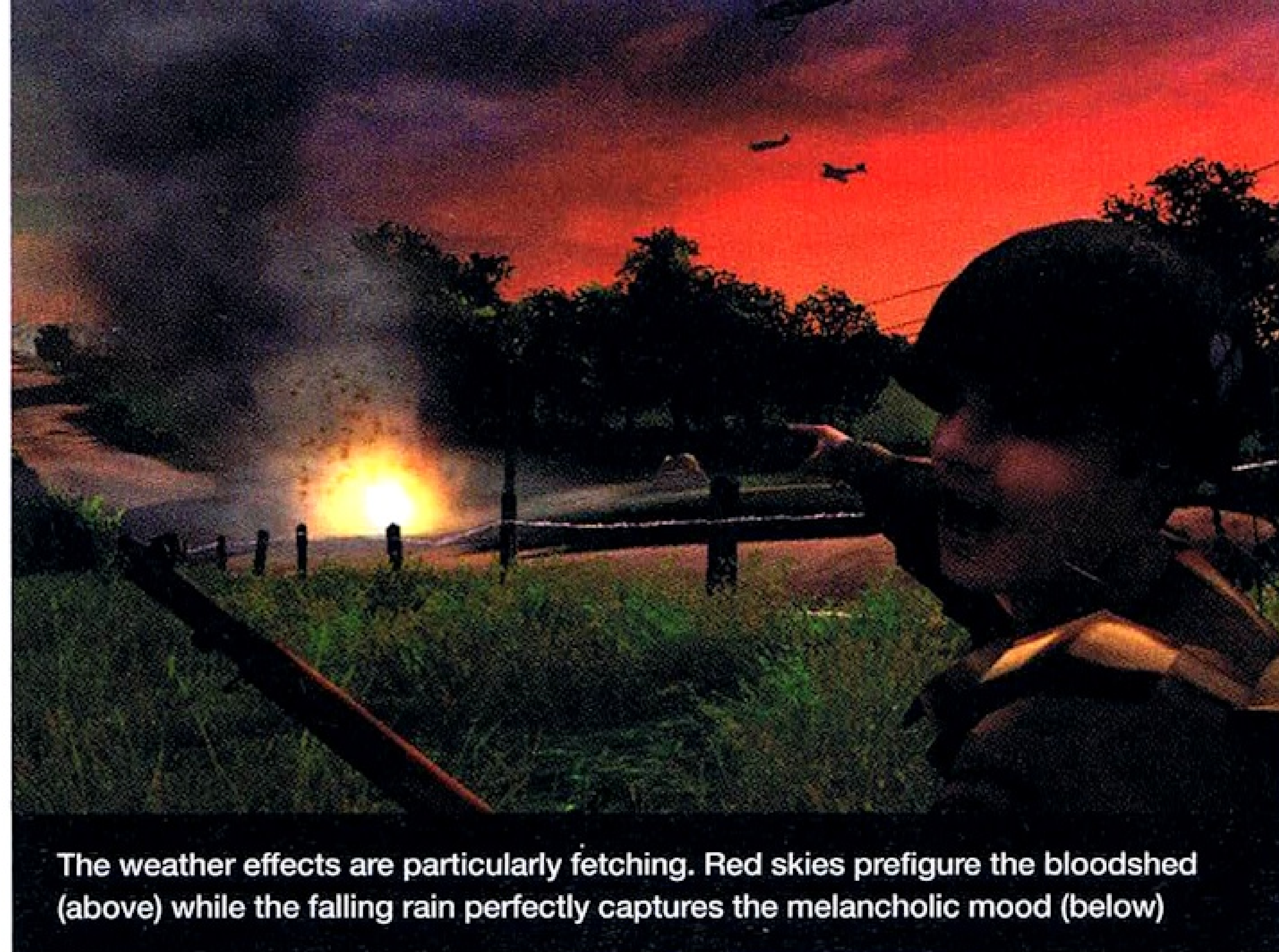
Interestingly, there's also an overhead tactical view that can be triggered by pausing the game. The camera slowly pans out from your position to give you an overview of the field of battle, highlighting both enemy and allied forces. It's a feature that may appear at odds with Gearbox's staunch approach to historical accuracy and tactical realism, but after playtesting Pitchford believes it improves gameplay dramatically. It's reassuring to find a developer keen to incorporate a mechanic for the good of the game even if it does threaten to impinge on the original formula.

Intelligence corps

But is the AI up to the job? There are four levels of sophistication. The first is Simulated Intelligence, based on standard military tactical procedure; the second is Expert Systems, which reacts to environmental obstacles; the third is Situational AI, a state that alters depending on what the enemy is doing and the tactics they employ. The fourth is the most basic: Scripted AI. This doesn't answer anything, of course, until it can be seen working in-game, but hopefully Gearbox's experience with *Halo* should deliver a canny enemy, not afraid to take cover and organise attacks. Pitchford is confident, noting a little wryly that *Halo*'s AI was good "at manoeuvring around boulders and trees."

It's the specificity of *Brothers In Arms* that sets it apart from any other wargame on the market. The forensic approach to data gathering may enhance the experience and make *Brothers In Arms* educational as well as deeply engrossing. It might also prove to be its Achilles' heel. There are two worries with the Gearbox approach: first, the focus on historical accuracy is necessarily time-consuming – will it be a distraction from building balanced and interesting gameplay features? After all, it's much easier to recreate real-world locations and real objectives than it is to make its inhabitants behave in a clever way in combat situations. Second, there's the suspicion that it could turn into a history lecture wrapped up in a FPS engine.

GEARBOX'S FOCUS ON HISTORICAL ACCURACY IS TIME-CONSUMING – WILL IT BE A DISTRACTION?

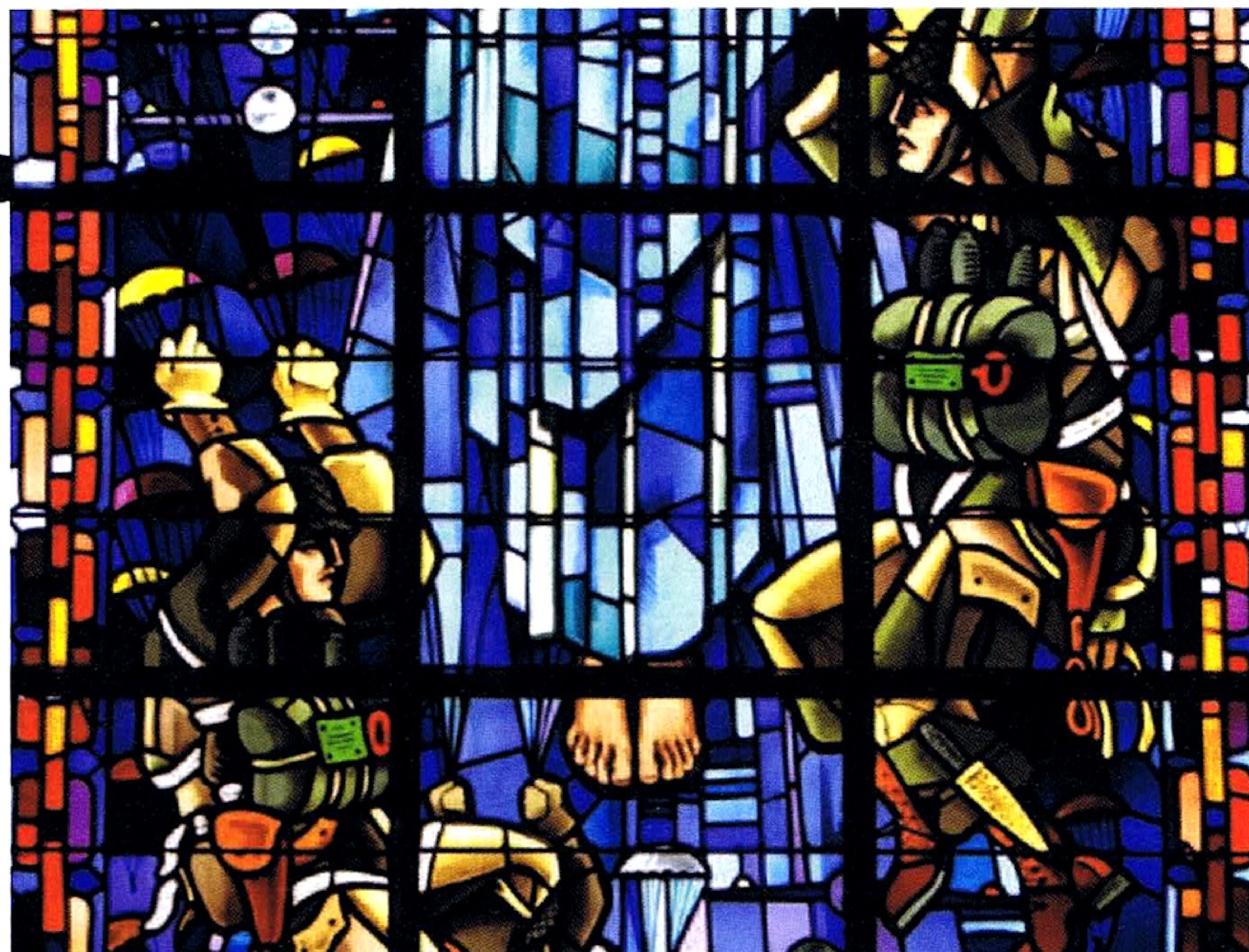


The weather effects are particularly fetching. Red skies prefigure the bloodshed (above) while the falling rain perfectly captures the melancholic mood (below)









The remains of a German gun emplacement and bunker above Utah beach (top). A stained-glass window in the church in Saint-Marie-du-Mont (above) became a fitting tribute to the paratroopers from 502nd division

So far, we've made little reference to the working game itself, and this is because, so far, there's only been a one-level demo available to play. Yet already there's enough spark and excitement in the situations we've seen to convince us that this is no feeble FPS bolstered by a few extravagant cut-scenes. The tactical directions are not dissimilar to those employed in *Freedom Fighters*: the left trigger brings up context-sensitive commands that you can issue to your two fire teams, while the white button switches between them. You then issue the relevant commands – fall back, engage, suppress, etc. The soldiers under your command will snap to their tasks quickly, and the controls never feel clumsy.

Gearbox also has a broadly realistic view of character mortality. There will be no health bars, magical medical canteens lying conveniently around, or multiple lives. If you do something stupid, you die. Warnings will be given: bullets whizz by your ears followed by flecks of red blood splashing across your vision if you stay out in the open. Failing to respond to these obvious signs by not taking cover and you'll inevitably keel over and die. There are checkpoint markers during each mission but the game teaches you the importance of self-preservation very quickly.

The only thing at odds with Gearbox's approach to 'realism' during battles is its use of suppression meters. Take shots at the Germans and bright red circles appear above their heads. Each red pie is eaten away, *Pikmin*-style, as the enemy come under more fire to indicate that they're pinned down. It's clear and concise shorthand for a new player, but probably too lurid for tactical purists. Fortunately, *Brothers In Arms* does give you the option to switch them off.

But is Pitchford worried that the interest in WWII is waning? After all, just when most other developers have moved on to the Gulf War, Vietnam or fictional conflicts in North Korea, Gearbox is back where the likes of EA was several years ago. "With programmes like Band Of Brothers the mindshare has increased and just a few days ago the D-Day commemorations were happening here," he says confidently. "We want to build games that we can't find anywhere else. *Brothers In Arms* is something Gearbox has been working on for years – we just didn't talk about it until it was getting close to being done."

War and videogames have always been close partners but the relationship has rarely been one of mutual respect. *Brothers In Arms* could change all that, delivering an entertaining and – dare we say the dreaded word – educational videogame. Whatever the case, it's likely to have more impact and be more relevant to a generation of teenagers left cold by relics in a museum. And that can't be a bad thing.

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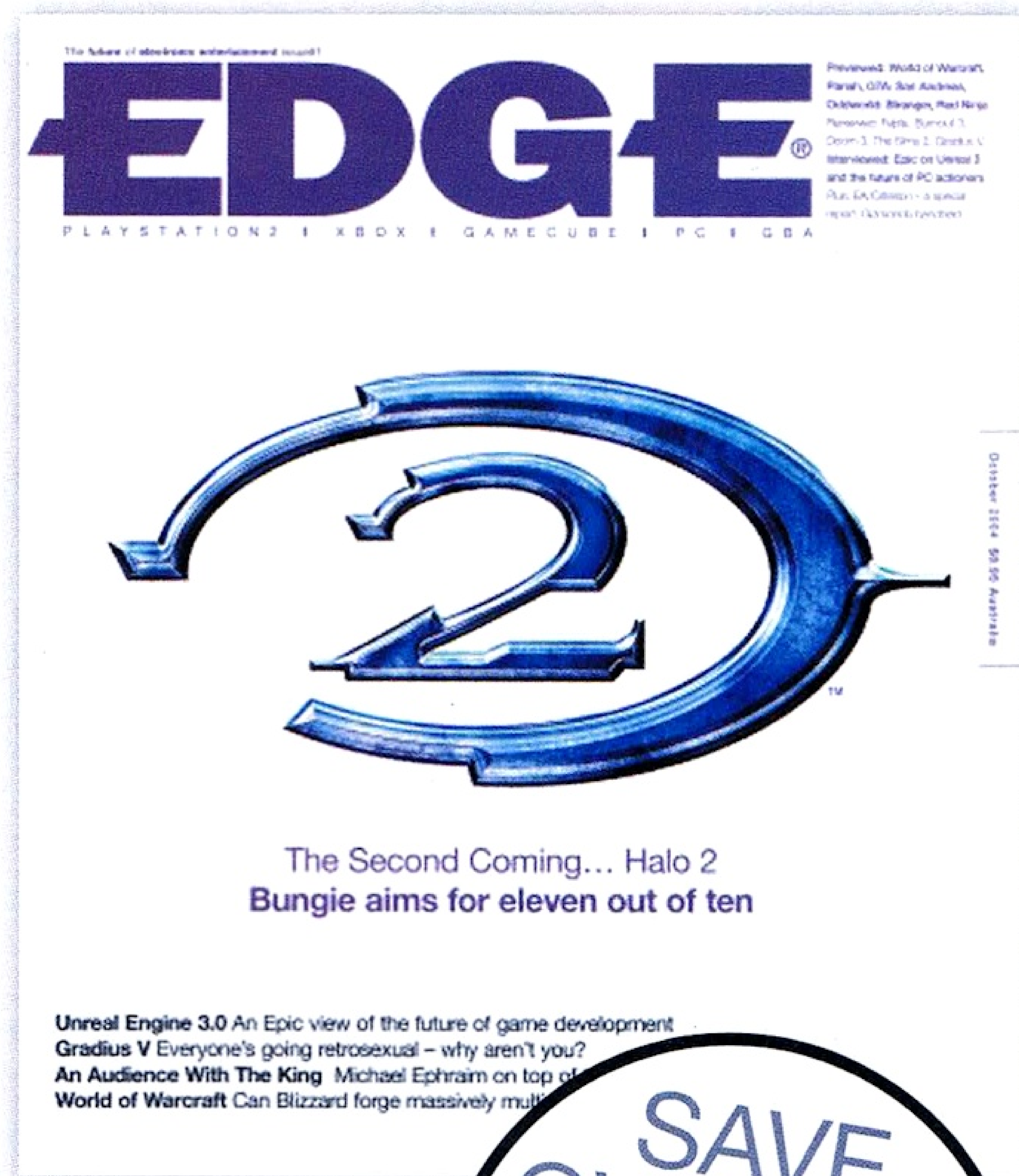
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The unreal thing

Epic's Unreal Engine 3 produces truly unreal-looking results. But what does it mean for gaming? We asked its makers all about it

Time never stops, and we are late. Not late as in missing deadlines; today we are late because London is glued up, there's a tube strike that's bringing chaos to the surface, and the cars aren't going anywhere. "'Nother five minutes, mate," says the cab driver, and then returns his eyes to the road. So we collapse back on the seat in frustration, flick through our notes, and think about what we're going to see today. New generation cycle. New generation engine. C'est la vie.

Ten minutes and ten thousand profuse apologies later, we're in the reception of PR stalwart Bastion, waiting for our time with Unreal Engine 3.0 and three of the men responsible for it – Epic's **Mark Rein** (vice president), **Tim Sweeney** (programmer and founder), and **Alan Willard** (level designer). We remember playing their products ten years ago, tiny, polished shareware arcade games. Things have moved on. Time never stops.

Another 15 minutes. We walk into a small, stuffy room with an nVidia-branded PC pumping out heat and technical superiority. Two men are sat next to it. Willard introduces himself and Sweeney, then, as Rein walks in, says: "…And this is John Carmack." If you've ever wondered what an LOL sounds like, it's the sound you're hearing now. This is The Three Stooges, as performed by three 3D pioneers.

Settling down, they prepare for a lengthy Q&A session involving new 3D graphics, firstperson shooters, console gaming, and *Marble Madness*…

Another generation, another engine, then. What's been going on in development?

Sweeney: We've redesigned the rendering tech from the ground up for Direct X 9.0. PixelShader 2.0 is the absolutely minimum graphics model we support. There are gonna be a lot of optimisations in place and lined up for 3.0. And that's just the start – there'll be a 4.0 and we'll go on from there.

Do you think that this cycle of improvement is going to continue forever?

Sweeney: Well, I think it will, actually. GPUs have a load of hard-coded limitations in them right now, in the number of vertex or NURB lines or texture samples or any of these other technical limitations. At some point in the next few years they're going to become computationally complete, where they're going to be able to execute an unlimited number of instructions from memory, and all those hard-code limits become caches. So I think there'll come a point for GPUs, just like there was for CPUs, where they're complete, and from then on additional features are purely for optimisation and don't allow fundamentally new features to be created.

So where does that leave you?

Sweeney: I don't think software is ever going to be done. Really, it's like a CPU. When you've got a CPU with a certain amount of features you can write any program on it. The only question is performance. I think there's a good 20 or 30 years of effort left on the engine side. You're adding new features to improve the realism, and that's going to help you create better, more realistic games. But the hardware problem, that's really close to being solved.

It's not a short-term concern, then.

Sweeney: We figure we've a factor of somewhere between 10,000 and 40,000 to go before we can render scenes that are truly photorealistic. If you look at outdoor scenes with trees and really realistic characters, we've a long way to go. But over my career, since the first game I programmed 12 years ago, we've actually improved by a factor of 10,000 already. So you're really looking at a timeframe of about 15 years before hardware gets where it really needs to be.

Making something Unreal (left to right): Mark Rein, Alan Willard and Tim Sweeney



Sweeney is the coder's coder. Softly spoken, but with a forceful edge, he is Epic's Carmack – clearly hugely intelligent, but also sometimes just as incomprehensible, at least to those not versed in the arcane equations of engine mathematics. He grins with nostalgia when we mention Solar Winds *and* Epic Pinball. *Interestingly, as we are shown the technology that makes up Unreal Engine 3, Sweeney is the only one not to say anything. He doesn't need to fight its corner, he just sits and smiles, confident that the engine will stand up to scrutiny on its own.*

But Epic doesn't just make engines, it makes games.

Willard: That's right.

And you have to be looking at the evolution from that point of view, too. Obviously in more recent times you've specialised in firstperson shooters, which is an increasingly crowded genre. Where do you think that genre is going?

Willard: Well, I think the age of the tactical shooter, *Counter-Strike* and so on, that's coming to an end. And I don't think anything's really stepped up to take its place yet.

Rein: Why is it coming to an end?

Willard: Because the market's saturated, they've made it to consoles, and the majority of them are on consoles now.

Rein: But that doesn't mean they're ending. They're still gonna be making them.

Willard: No, but I think they…

Sweeney: We don't really know.

[Laughter]

Rein: I mean, I know what we're gonna do. I know we're obviously gonna have better graphics in each game. We're gonna have a much broader emphasis on physics. Tim explained earlier how now we build cars by putting the physics components together and applying real forces to them, as opposed to just faking it which we've done in the past. So you know we're going to have that, we're going to have much better scripting, much more detailed stories. Obviously, the lighting and materials are going to be more realistic, and we'll show you the human head that we have that looks one hundred times better than what people saw in games two years ago, for example. There's no question that we're going to be able to make much better games by having the tools and putting the control directly in the hands of the artist. That's the reason why, at Epic, we've been able to put so much money into the engine side of things. It's the only way we can compete with the really large teams, by having a much more productive team ourselves. And the way to do that is to have better tools than everyone else. So there's no question. I think mod makers are gonna do pretty incredible things, too. I think you'll see more and more mod makers making what were last year's retail-quality games.

"I think there's a good 20 or 30 years of effort left on the engine side. We've a factor of between 30,000 and 40,000 to go before we can render scenes that are truly photorealistic"

Rein is in love with his company's technology. Of course he is: that's Epic's bread and butter. But you'd be hard pressed to find a more enthusiastic evangelist anywhere, his 'ohmygosh' asides leaping from incredible technology to stunning graphics to unmissable games. For the photoshoot, beneath grey skies on Bastion's roof, he puts on a pair of sunglasses. He is self-aware, but not particularly self-conscious. Over lunch we tell a joke, and Rein likes it so much he encourages us to high five him. Non-negotiable. During the tech demo, Rein boasts of the incredible things his engine is capable of, but in a manner that is either unscripted or impressively acted: "Ohmygosh, show him the…" "And when the thing hits the…" "Oh, load up that, you gotta see this…"

What would you say Epic's strengths are, as a company?

Sweeney: Well, we've always had a big focus on tools.

Willard: Tech support.

Sweeney: Tools and support, yeah. Really having a great content pipeline so artists can create game levels, assets, textures, and put them all together. We've always had a much more thorough editor. The view you see of the world is the engine doing a pixel-accurate rendering of what you see in the game. It's a WYSIWYG editing environment, always has been. And now with all the new tools, like the new shader system that lets artists create complicated tools, the gameplay scripting system… it's all about empowering artists and content creators to create better games without being so bottlenecked by programmers, as they have been in the past.

It's a big limiting factor for teams these days. When you've got development teams of 30 to 80 people, it's vital to maximise the productivity of everyone involved. That means artists who can create complete assets and bring them into the game without requiring other people to work with, without requiring programmers to do certain tasks. So really the whole workflow is the big strength of Unreal Engine 3.0.

Does id have anything you envy?

Rein: John Carmack.

[Laughter]

Sweeney: All right… And *Doom* is a great franchise.
Rein: Oh, they have awesome IP.
Sweeney: It was really the game that introduced the FPS genre ten years ago.
Rein: It certainly startled us. When we looked at their games we were like: 'Oh, we wanna do that!' And I'm sure a lot of other people got careers looking at *Doom* or *Wolfenstein* and thinking the same. Their history is just… we envy that. And their bank account. That's pretty spectacular. Their parking lot. They're a great company; we have a lot of respect for them. It's great when people say: 'You and id are so close'. That was the dream seven or eight years ago. We've been really lucky.

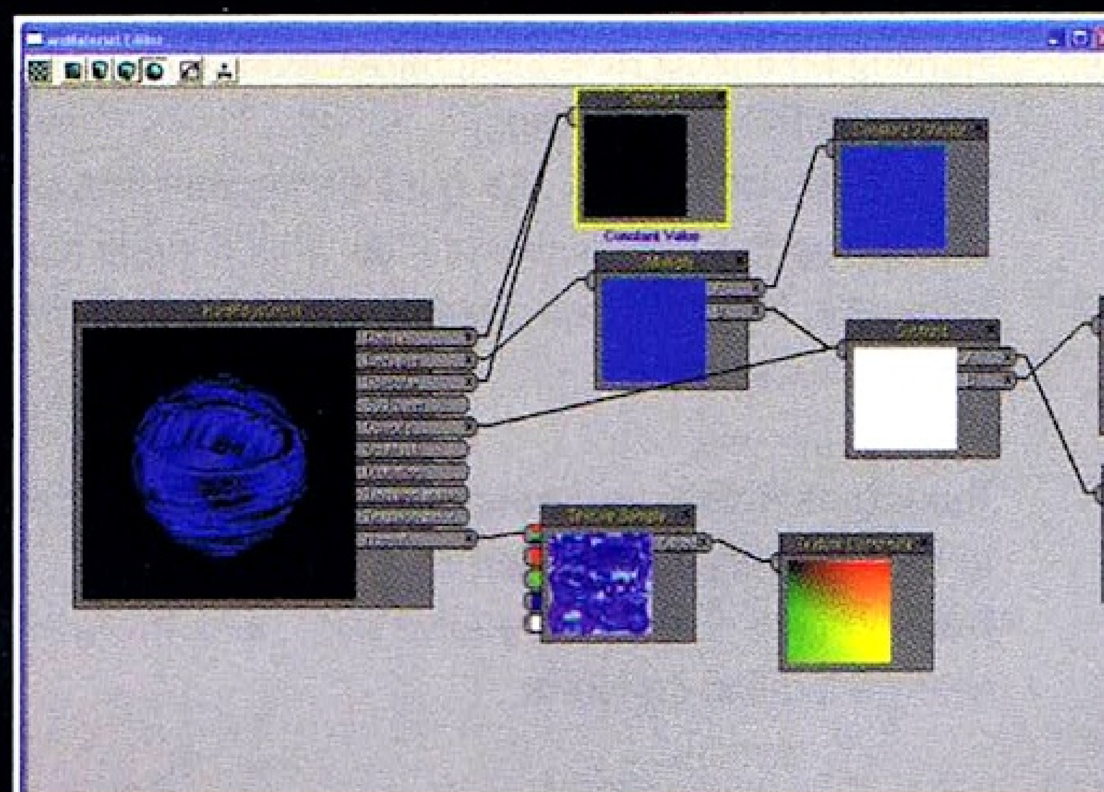
Do you think the 'corridor shooter' is dead?
Willard: No, not at all. *Doom 3*'s just shiped, and that looks like it's doing really well. So clearly there's an attraction in that kind of game.
Rein: As you saw from our demos, we're very much still focused on getting the best visuals we can, indoors or outdoors. There's no question that a lot of people's lives go on indoors. And you have to pay attention to that. It wouldn't be a realistic game if you didn't. That's just not life.
Willard: It's easier to make convincing indoor environments than outdoor…
Sweeney: The amount of detail you need to make a realistic outdoor scene is far beyond 3D cards now. What everyone does is make a rougher approximation than indoors.

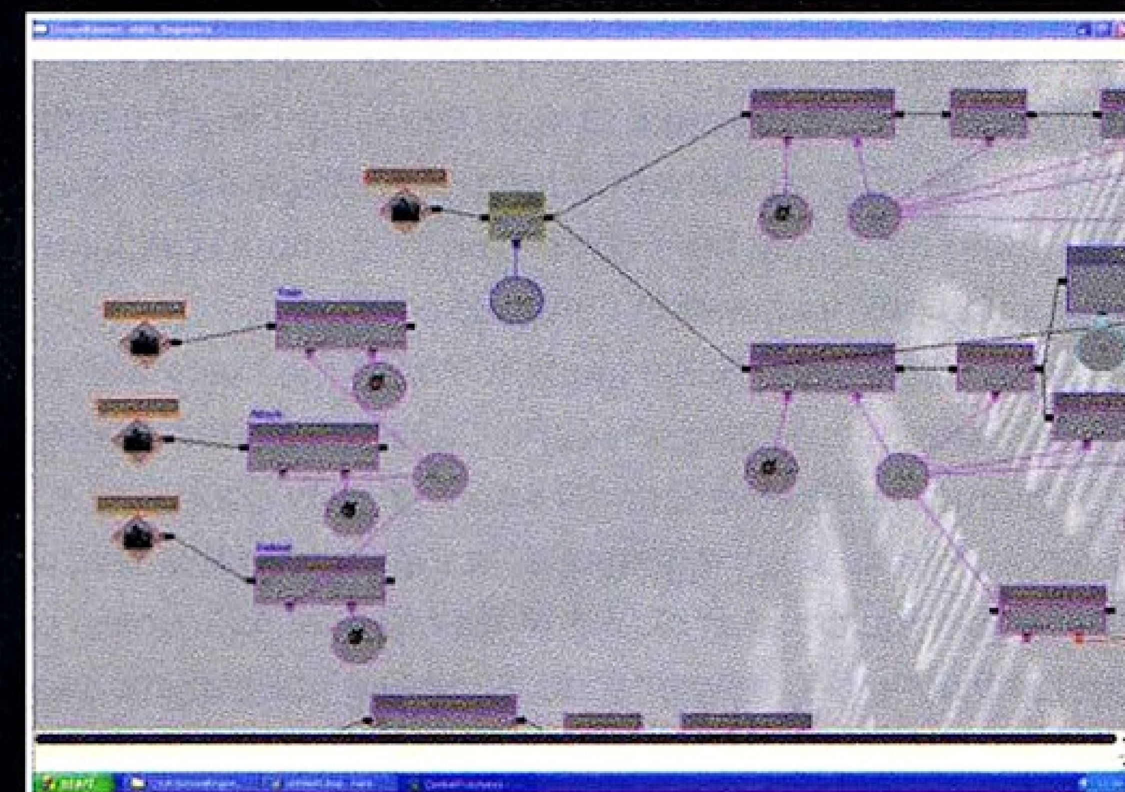
But as soon as technology meant we could approximate outdoor environments, all games moved outdoors. Do you think that games are ever misled by technology?
Willard: Well, yeah, but how much of that was because games wanted to go outdoors, so the hardware…
Rein: And also, if you think about some of the games we all love playing today – *UT 2004*, *Battlefield*… You wanna drive tanks, fly planes, and you probably can't do that indoors… [Laughter] …without breaking stuff. I mean, we've already had a good mix of indoor and outdoor stuff. It's not a lot of fun chasing a character across 12 miles of terrain and shooting him with a flak cannon – you want to bounce it off a wall, chase him up some stairs, corner him… So I think our view of gaming is that you need balance. We want close-up combat and the car chases, things like that.
Willard: But it's a lot easier to build suspense indoors than it is outdoors. And when you're building gameplay elements, it's a lot easier to be in control of the environment.

Willard is laconic Epic. He drifts in and out of the interview – in the brief post-lunch session he's so distracted by his own engine (in which he's painting a model of a head with stained glass) that there's an awkward pause while the other two wait for him to pick up one of our stray questions. If there is a dry quip to be made, he will make it. Otherwise, he is mostly content with dragging out curves of action in his new toy, spraypainting rocks on barren worlds. The demo is Willard's chance to show off. At one point, Rein turns to him and asks him to show us something. You gotta show them that, you gotta… Willard just stops, turns to Rein slowly. "I am doing," he says. Oh. Continue.

You're primarily regarded as a PC company, but how do you feel about console gaming?
Rein: Well, actually, our most successful licensee has done five or six million units on console, and that's *Splinter Cell*. So we're very interested in seeing people use our technology on as many platforms as possible. Unreal Engine 3.0 is very



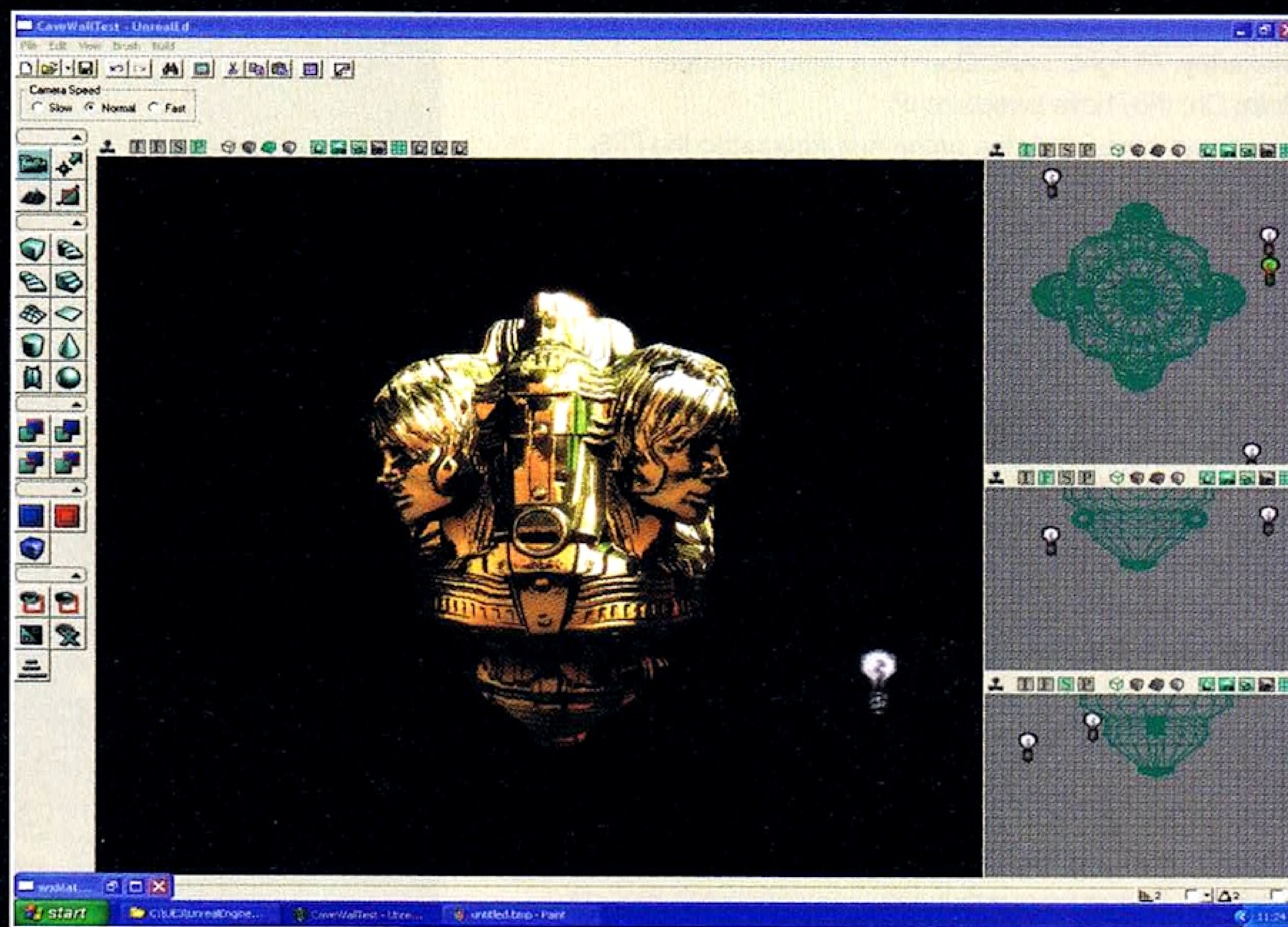






The top priority of Unreal Engine 3 is the tools pipeline, which allows artists to develop complex materials and scripted behaviours (centre images) without the assistance of programmers. Such empowerment is the future of game development





A dynamically lit, normal-mapped character in a complex scene (above); the base art consists of over 200m polygons. The Unreal Editor (right) continues to evolve, adding countless features

much designed for use on next-generation consoles. The feature set, the multithreading stuff, this is very much aimed at high-end PCs, which will be run of the mill by the time we ship – and nVidia will have something even more spectacular then – and next-generation consoles.

We merged with Scion studios. We worked very well with Digital Extremes, a company up in Canada. And we worked with them collaboratively, and it was just really good – whenever we worked together, all in the same place, finishing *Unreal* and the creation of *Unreal Tournament*, we turned out our best work. So we wanted to recapture that down in North Carolina, and started a new studio down the hall from us. We used our clout and influence to get the best-of-breed employees for that company. Then, recently, we were about to move into a new building, and they were about to move offices, and we won't all be together and we'll lose the whole collaborative thing. And we thought: 'We can't do that!' So we went and approached them about merging the two companies, and they really liked the idea.

Anyway, that studio started to make console games. And now they're making *Unreal Championship 2*, and it's fantastic. It's a much better game than we thought it was going to be at the beginning. They're just a great team who've done a fantastic job. And they've also really exercised the technology – the Unreal Engine 2X, the Xbox-specific version of the Unreal Engine 2, is much more optimised than we would have ever made ourselves. It's probably the best-looking game you'll see on Xbox.

Willard: But we're not shy of developing on consoles. There was a version of *UT* on DC, we shipped *UT* as a PS2 launch title, there was the original *Unreal Championship* on Xbox…

Were they developed in-house, though?

Willard: The PS2 *UT* was.

Rein: We have multiple teams, and we're doing all our own franchise work. The *Unreal* games are completely in-house, so we have control over the quality of them. That makes the engine a better cross-platform solution, because the guys working on the games are also working on the engines.

Willard: We have a team who can spend all of their time working on the console stuff, rather than having to worry about the PC side of things.

Rein: And also it's not… it's not inconvenient that consoles are approaching the power of PCs. That's made a big difference. It's just a nice coincidence that they're rising to the power of what we do.

Talking of which, you must be gearing up for a push on to next-generation platforms.

Rein: We are. Everything you've seen here, that's all aimed at next-generation consoles.

What can you tell us about your plans in that area? Have you entered into technology agreements?

Rein: We can't talk about it in specifics, but I mean I think it's well known that we've signed a deal with Microsoft to do some firstparty games with them, and I think you can draw some conclusions about what we're doing.

New franchises?

Rein: Yes. The next game we're doing for Microsoft is not *Unreal*. It uses *Unreal* technology, but it's not *Unreal*.

***Unreal* technology isn't confined to firstperson shooters.**

Rein: And Unreal Engine 3.0 even less so. There's no question that we're getting more and more generalised.

Sweeney: With Unreal Engine 3.0 you could make a firstperson shooter, a thirdperson RPG…

Willard: A bowling game…

Sweeney: You could make a racing game…

Rein: A pinball game!

Sweeney: Anything that has the general rendering patterns of the engine.

There've been some really leftfield things built with your current engine.

Rein: *Marble Madness*! Have you seen *Exolon*?! Let me fire it up here…

[Rein makes to boot up the game]

Sweeney: Um… let's have the interview.

Rein: Oh, OK. We'll show it later. But yeah, there's a *Tetris*, and this, *Exolon*, it's a mod entered in the nVidia million-dollar Make Something Unreal mod contest. And it's like *Xevious*, *Gradius*, those kind of games. Overhead space shooters, from the past, they're great games.

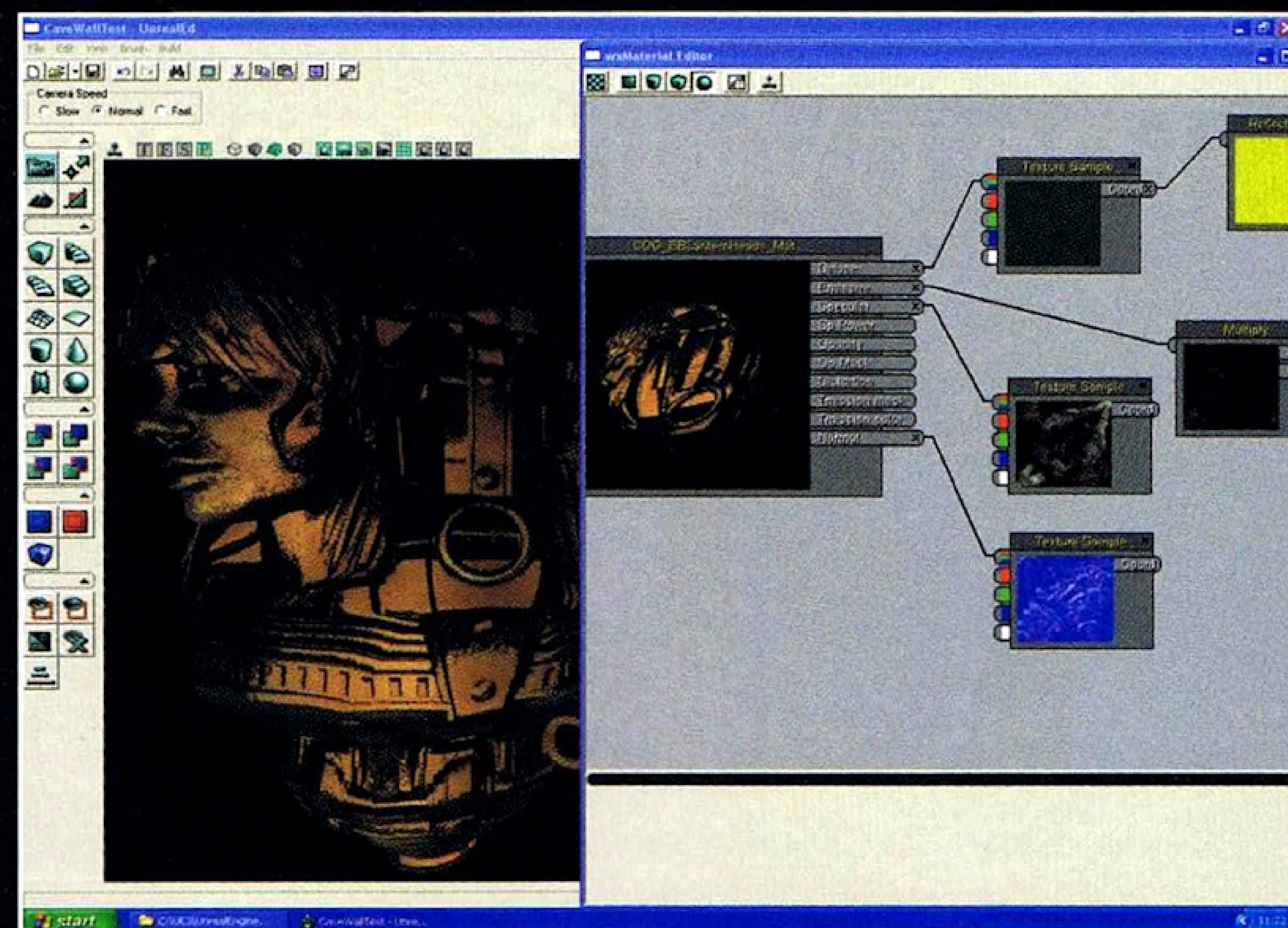
But another very convenient thing for us is that the consoles are delivering much more power than you can use. If you're going to make a boxing game, or a football game, and you don't already have an engine, you'd be crazy not to license our technology. There's no reason why it wouldn't be better than a specifically made engine. In the past, if you wanted to get the most out of a PlayStation or an Xbox or a Dreamcast, you wouldn't get a huge benefit from using Unreal Engine to make a boxing game. Now you do.

"Another convenient thing for us is that consoles are delivering much more power than you can use. If you don't already have an engine, you'd be crazy not to license our technology"

The demonstration of Unreal Engine 3 begins with a wander through a gothic mansion. There's little here that you won't already presume; Unreal Engine 3 is capable of obscenely beautiful things, delicately sculpted environments coated in detailed textures, mapping that can fool the eye into thinking one polygon is hundreds, and lighting to swoon over.

The physics system, too, is as impressive as you'd expect. The main demonstration area for that is a cellar with a fridge; Willard opens the fridge, removes the shelves, flings a ragdoll inside, and then topples over some shelves and crates for good measure, contents spilling everywhere. Everything behaves exactly as you'd expect, smoothly and





Foliage shaders support light transmission, which lets light pass through leaves realistically (left). A dynamically lit statue (above), with a view of its materials in the UnrealEd shadow editor

seamlessly. There are other, smaller demos, too: at one stage the designer loads up a huge tower of Jenga-style blocks and then knocks them over, from every which way, as many times as you'd like. Things tumble, collapse, bounce, fall, slide. Bodies break apart when flung around. The consistency of their joints can be altered. But the real enhancements here – at least, the enhancements that aren't visible in the screenshots, and won't be second-guessed by those who know what time's inexorable progress does to engine technology – are in the construction tools. Put simply, Unreal Engine 3 will allow gamers to build even more spectacular worlds with even greater ease.

How's Make Something Unreal going?
Rein: We added a fourth phase – I believe that's wrapping up in September. Then, after the fourth phase, I believe we're going to choose five, because there are five cash prizes, and then those guys will basically get another couple of months to make the final version of their game. We'll probably post some comments on their mods, public critique, things we like and don't like. And then after a couple of months we'll give out the grand prize, and someone's going to win an Unreal Engine licence.

And they have their choice, too – if they want to commercialise the mod they've done now they can take Unreal Engine 2, if they want to scrap that and work on something for the next gen, they can take Unreal Engine 3. It's gonna be great, and the quality of the mods is just spectacular. There's just some really great stuff, both in the firstperson shooter category and the non-FPS category.

What was the actual motivation behind it?
Rein: Well, a whole bunch of people got their jobs at Epic because they'd worked on mods. One goal is to help people find their way into the business. Another is to help people learn how to use our tools, and hopefully if those people show talent they could be people that we hire, that our licensees hire, that other companies hire that don't use our technology but end up being interested in it because they have the skillset. It's to highlight the people who make these things and give them a little notoriety. And it's also great for *UT2004* because it extends the life of the game – it's making another ten or 20 games for that. So not only do you get the 6Gb of data we've provided, but there's all these other things you can do as well.

Do you think that sometimes, because the *Unreal* brand is so strong, it does your engine a disservice? That people just associate it with firstperson shooters rather than its capabilites?
Willard: We get that question a lot. We go and talk to people and they say: 'Has anyone made a non-FPS with it?' And we're like: 'All the time'. *Adventure Pinball*, for example.
Rein: Sometimes we're handicapped by our success. But that's OK, and we're going to get that message out.
Willard: The Harry Potter games – they're certainly no firstperson shooters.
Rein: The Harry Potter PC games have sold millions of copies, and they were created using Unreal Engine 1, originally. The current one's Unreal Engine 2.

But you've stuck to fast-paced FPSs. Can you see Epic producing a slower, more thoughtful game – like *Deus Ex*, for example, which also uses Unreal Technology?
Sweeney: I think you'll see a variety of styles from us in the future. We've got a great deal of respect for story-driven singleplayer games. Just because *UT* is a fast action shooter doesn't mean you won't see that sort of thing from us.
Willard: But I'd say the odds of us doing an RPG are significantly lower than other companies.

The feeling among much of the gaming community is that you make engines first and games second.



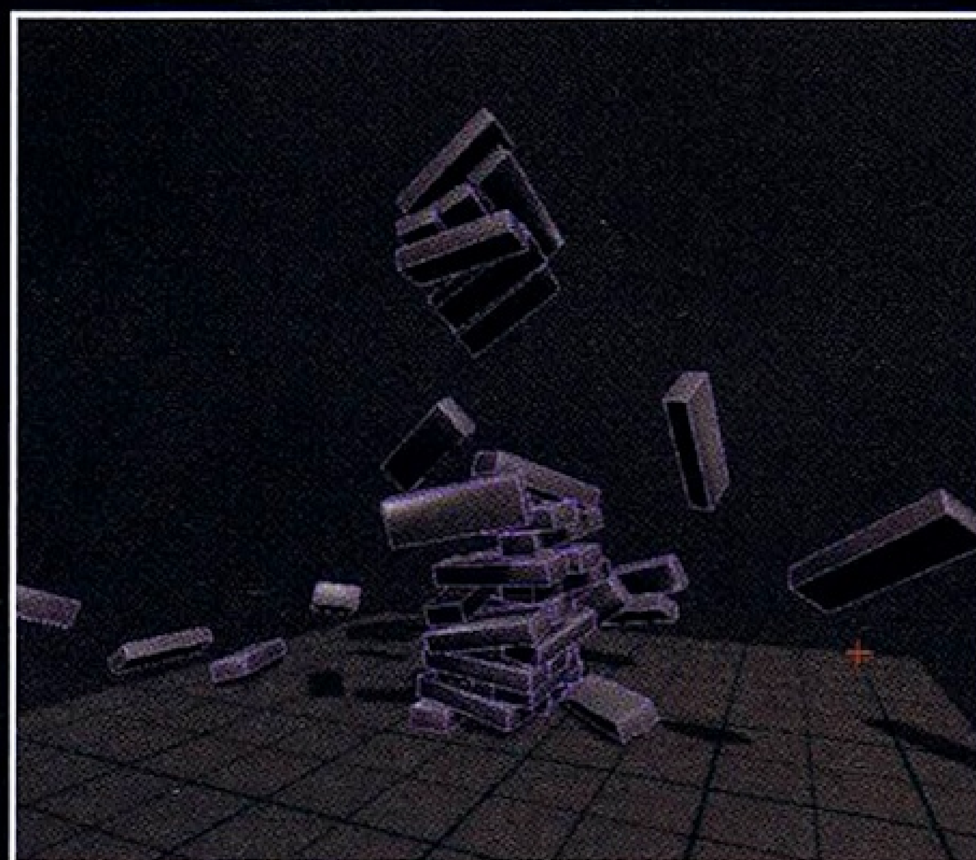
The nVidia connection

Epic's presence in London wasn't born entirely out of altruistic desire to share the joy of Unreal Engine 3.0. Its new engine has been written to take advantage of Pixelshader 3.0 technology, the next-generation standard of hardware shading supported by nVidia's latest high-end graphics cards. More than that, ATI has chosen to omit the technology from its cards, meaning that gamers wanting to get the absolute best from Unreal Engine 3.0 games will have no choice but to buy an nVidia-branded graphics card – specifically the GeForce 6800. All of a sudden, the hardware manufacturer's eagerness to get Epic over the UK to perform some first-hand future evangelism becomes much clearer.

A glance through the 6800's spec sheet reveals details which have the more technically minded of PC graphics whores slavering. CineFX 3.0 shading architecture, 64bit texturing and blending, Intellisample 3.0 technology, Ultrashadow II technology (designed to benefit shadow-heavy games, like *Doom 3*) – all buzzwords and phrases that may mean little to some, but should deeply affect the things they're going to play for many years to come. The hardware might be high-end at the moment, but by the time Unreal Engine 3.0 comes around it'll be well into the traditional PC cycle, slipping gradually into the mainstream as the pricepoint drops and then into obscurity as it is superseded by bigger numbers and even more dramatic phrasing.

Rein also offered much enthusiasm for nVidia's SLI technology during Epic's trip. SLI-capable systems have motherboards that support two PCI Express graphics cards simultaneously, and allow the cards to cooperate effectively and share their workload. As well as exploiting the increased bandwidth offered by PCI Express, the cards communicate using a dedicated high-speed digital interface, and use 'unique software algorithms' to boost speed still further. Rein claims the performance almost doubles as a result, as, evidently, does nVidia's profit from each user who buys into the technology.

But still, it presents a new upgrade path for those who might only want to buy one of the cards for now, and charitable observers could point out that the graphics specialist is reinvesting in the community that supports it. It's the sponsor of Epic's Make Something Unreal competition, in which the mod community is currently competing to win an impressive amount of fast PC hardware and an Unreal Engine licence.



It's not just in graphic realism that Unreal Engine 3 makes strides – a physical simulation component handles dynamic collisions and myriad other effects



Unreal has always handled a variety of indoor and outdoor environments, and Unreal Engine 3 won't disappoint. This scene shows dynamically tesselating normal-mapped terrain, animated foliage, and cloud formations rendered with light functions

Rein: Well, you've got to make engines first, otherwise…

Sure, but in terms of priorities, rather than the sequence in which you construct a game.
Rein: If we don't make good games, nobody's going to buy our engine. The games come first because we make more money making games.
Willard: And also it drives development of the engine.
Rein: And what would you be making an engine for if it wasn't for a game? I think if companies were standalone, if they just made engines, they'd make pretty uninspired stuff. I think even Criterion make games – they're not just an engine company.

Building outdoor environments is as simple as stretching the terrain in the direction you want, Populous*-style (in fact, Rein says that all that you'd need to turn the editor into* Populous *would be hundreds of people milling around). Features for the landscape are applied in the same way one might paint in Photoshop. This is the way artists paint worlds.*

But these aren't textures, polygons being skinned – these are objects, landscape features, each with their own attributes, properties that will define how they interact other objects and players. Everything in Unreal Engine 3 has a flowchart that defines its properties, simple flags and Boolean boxes that take the control over materials previously possessed by programmers and put it back in the hands of the designers. The idea of artists painting worlds is more than just a visual metaphor. It's how Epic sees the future for gaming's creatives. The idea is that they don't have to go to a coder in their team and ask if something's possible. They can just do it themselves.

What's Epic's dream game? You're trying to make the ultimate engine, but what goes on top of that?
Sweeney: If you look at our history, I don't think we have one ultimate game, and then when we make that game we're done. We've made so many different games, and sure, you'll see a lot of *UT*-style games in the future, but we've made pinball games, *Jazz Jackrabbit*, all kinds of things.

But do you see yourself going back to that sort of thing?
Sweeney: Yeah, sure, it's a possibility. I wouldn't rule it out.
Willard: We always have an idea of what our next project's going to be about halfway through our current one. So there's always a sense of: 'I can't wait to get this out of the way so we can move on to the next thing'. We'll always make games that we enjoy playing.
Rein: Even if we look at something and think we can make more doing this. You can't be successful making games you don't want to play. We make games for us.
Sweeney: We make games for people who like the games we make, right?
[Laughter]
Willard: But I get criticised for that all the time. There's one guy on our forum, he says: [adopts bolshy youngster voice] 'Epic don't make games for us, they make games for themselves!' And he's using my quote in his tagline as a negative thing. He just doesn't understand – if you don't love playing the game, you're not gonna have any passion…

But perhaps that's an industry problem – we're all either encouraging or making the games we want to play, and that's why we don't break out of this niche.
Sweeney: That's definitely true. There are very few people like Will Wright who think it'd be cool to make a family simulation game, for example. It's not one of the things that'd

come to the top of my mind. It's definitely a problem. Games are mostly made by young, aggressive males.
Rein: I don't see Will Wright as being aggressive!
Sweeney: Well, he's one of the exceptions, right? We're certainly that kind of type. You don't get a lot of female game developers. We get very, very few [female] resumes.
Willard: Actually, what I've seen is the larger companies, people like EA, they tend to have more, because it's more of a corporate culture. I do a lot of training where I go out and show tips and tricks and things, and I've been amazed at the number of women working there.
Rein: Are they developers, or producers?
Willard: No, they're in development. Programmers and artists. It has a lot to do with the culture of the company. They want less crude content, less blood, less violence.

Has any thirdparty really surprised you with what they've managed to get out of the technology?
Willard: *Splinter Cell* – that was a real surprise.
Sweeney: NCSoft with *Lineage*. Using the Unreal Engine to develop a massively multiplayer game. It's, y'know, one of the most popular games in Korea right now.
Rein: The Harry Potter games. Making a kids' game that's actually a quality, fun game. It's great. There's been a whole bunch – *Shrek 2*, *Brother Bear* – I think it's been surprising how many cool games and different genres there've been.

Do you think many people know *Splinter Cell* was built with Unreal Technology?
Rein: Absolutely. And that's good.

Do you think you're getting the credit you deserve?
Rein: I think most of the developers know, and they're who we license the technology to. I think that if end users can't tell, that's fantastic, because that's exactly what you want. Unreal Engine 3.0 will make it even easier, because it has this general-purpose shader system which makes it very easy for people to stylise games, and make, say, a film-noir game.

Do you think anyone's really going to make a film-noir game, though? Or will they stick with the videogame mainstay of super-realistic blood and guts?
Rein: I think now that it's possible to do that, I think, yeah, they'll start to take chances and experiment. The great breakout games of the business have always been somebody trying something different.
Sweeney: The previous generations' 3D hardware is responsible for the fact that all games look similar. You had a very limited set of rendering options, and artists didn't really have that much control. Now, with DirectX 9.0, every game can truly customise its look, and you'll see a lot of games where the art director, who really cares about the game's look and feel, makes it unique. You can see huge differences between movies, certain differences in saturation, processing, and that's now possible [in games].

Even if it's achievable, will developers take chances?
Rein: Well, we're going to. We're definitely going to have that kind of feel. Band Of Brothers and Saving Private Ryan, they're both perfect examples, where they want to make it feel like you were back in the day, and explosions were going off all around you, and the sky was filled with the pollution from all the explosives.

"We never put anything in the technology that we're not actually going to use. If it's not suitable for one of our games, we're not going to put it in because it can't be torture-tested"

Were either of those productions taking chances?
Rein: Artistic… no, you're right, but they're stylising them. And I think that's a chance in game development, because you haven't seen that in game development 'til now.
Willard: Because of the way the engine's laid out, it's very easy to change the look and feel by rewriting a couple of shaders. You can do cel shading and things like that because of the accessibility of pixel shaders.
Rein: That *XIII* was cool.
Willard: Yeah. So I think it's going to become much easier for any team to really quickly change the engine so it looks different and try things. It'll be a lot cheaper to try things, rather than having to rewrite the engine. You don't have to do that any more. Write one shader, say use this instead of that, and you're done.

It'd be handy if all gaming's problems came down to the complexity of shaders, but we're not convinced that turning a standard adventure into a noir is as simple as tinting visuals. Still, the point is that Unreal Engine 3.0 allows things to be trialled early and often. Will new forms of game emerge because of it? Possibly not, but it's the best opportunity gaming has of giving designers a clear, simple shot at turning their dreams into pixels. The first company that gets to play with it, of course, is Epic. Providing technology for others was a decision that came out of necessity, not desire.

When you began licensing engines, what were your expectations of the impact it would have on the firm?
Rein: Well, originally it was: 'We need to keep the lights on.' [Chuckles] And Microprose came to us and said: 'Would you license us this technology?' And we said yes! So it really wasn't a big plan, or a big idea. It wasn't something we consciously decided to do, but once we'd started we decided that it was really important that we gave people great support, and that we made games with the technology. Because that's what's going to impress people.

Our big thing is that we never put anything in the technology that we're not actually going to use. We don't have a big list of features that licensees would really like to have – if it's not suitable for one of our games, we're not going to put it in because it can't be torture-tested, or get the rigorous use it needs to be able to perform well. I think that's something we've been really smart about.

How important is it to Epic financially?
Rein: Um… it's pretty important. We don't discuss numbers, but people usually overplay the value of it. They think: 'Oh, wow, you must be making more money from licensing', but I think they don't understand how much money a hit game brings in. The real money comes from games; the licensing just helps smooth out the financials in between.
Sweeney: It's great because it makes us financially independent from the publisher. If the publisher screws us over and doesn't pay us for two months then we can get by with licensing. But our pricing is competitive, so we expect to make more money from our games than the engine.

Is being screwed over something you've come to expect from publishers?
Sweeney: Well, we've had really good results with Atari and Microsoft. They've treated us very well. You hear a lot of horror stories from developers, so this is something that's always on my mind, to not be dependent on one financial source.
Rein: The other thing is that the licensing income goes straight back into the engine. So everyone in the company is completely motivated to support the licensing as much as possible. They're just as motivated to see licensees' games come out and do really really well as they are for ours to come out and do really really well.





Full circle

With Halo 2 almost ready to roll, we make a return trip to Bungie's Seattle HQ in order to find out whether the wait has been worth it



Asking Bungie about the singleplayer component of *Halo 2* is still useless. Journalists do their best, playing the rephrasing game until it becomes embarrassing, but no matter how they twist direct questions into innocent-sounding gambits, Bungie will not budge. "We're not here to talk about the oneplayer game" becomes the familiar refrain.

Later, we get to speak alone with Bungie's studio manager, **Pete Parsons**, and ask if the secrecy is an attempt to give *Halo* a mystique, to make a geeky sci-fi FPS interesting in the same way Fry's made Turkish Delight seem exotic. "I can't talk about the singleplayer game…" he predictably begins, but then goes on to answer the question: "It's not about teasing our fans. We want *Halo 2* to be a surprise – to let gamers experience for themselves all the thrills and spills of the plot."

But keeping secrets can be hazardous. Bungie's decision to reveal absolutely nothing of *Halo 2*'s singleplayer campaign could backfire if the game doesn't live up to everyone's expectations. And that's the problem. With nothing to go on but a short demo revealed at E3 over two years ago the world has been abuzz with expectation and wild speculation ever since.

Cheekily, Bungie has even been poking a stick into its own forum, stirring up the crackpots and obsessives with the 'OFFICIAL Halo 2 Speculation Thread': 'Earth may be a storage planet for the Flood – they are hidden under the pyramids' and 'Master Chief will hook up with one of those 'new' female marines, and will have a half normal, half enhanced kid' are two posts setting the general tone.

Parsons is unapologetic about such activity: "The Bungie.net team is a big part of the company and it's one of the things that makes us special. I think our fans realise that we're having as much fun as they are. The team has built a vibrant community ensuring that the games don't end when they get released. For *Halo 2* we're going to turn it up to 11. On Live we're going to support fans with adjustable playlists and downloadable content. The singleplayer game is just the beginning."

Turning it up to 11 – is that the **Edge** score he's predicting? Whatever the case, this is a company supremely confident about the material it's about to release in just a few months' time. There's no sense here that *Halo 2* will disappoint in any way. You can see it in the Bungie swagger, the glint in the eye of delegates wheeled out to take questions before refusing to answer them. It's as if to say, speculate away, it doesn't matter – *Halo 2* will be everything you hoped for and more.

Game: **Halo 2**
Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Bungie**
Origin: **US**
Release: **November 9**



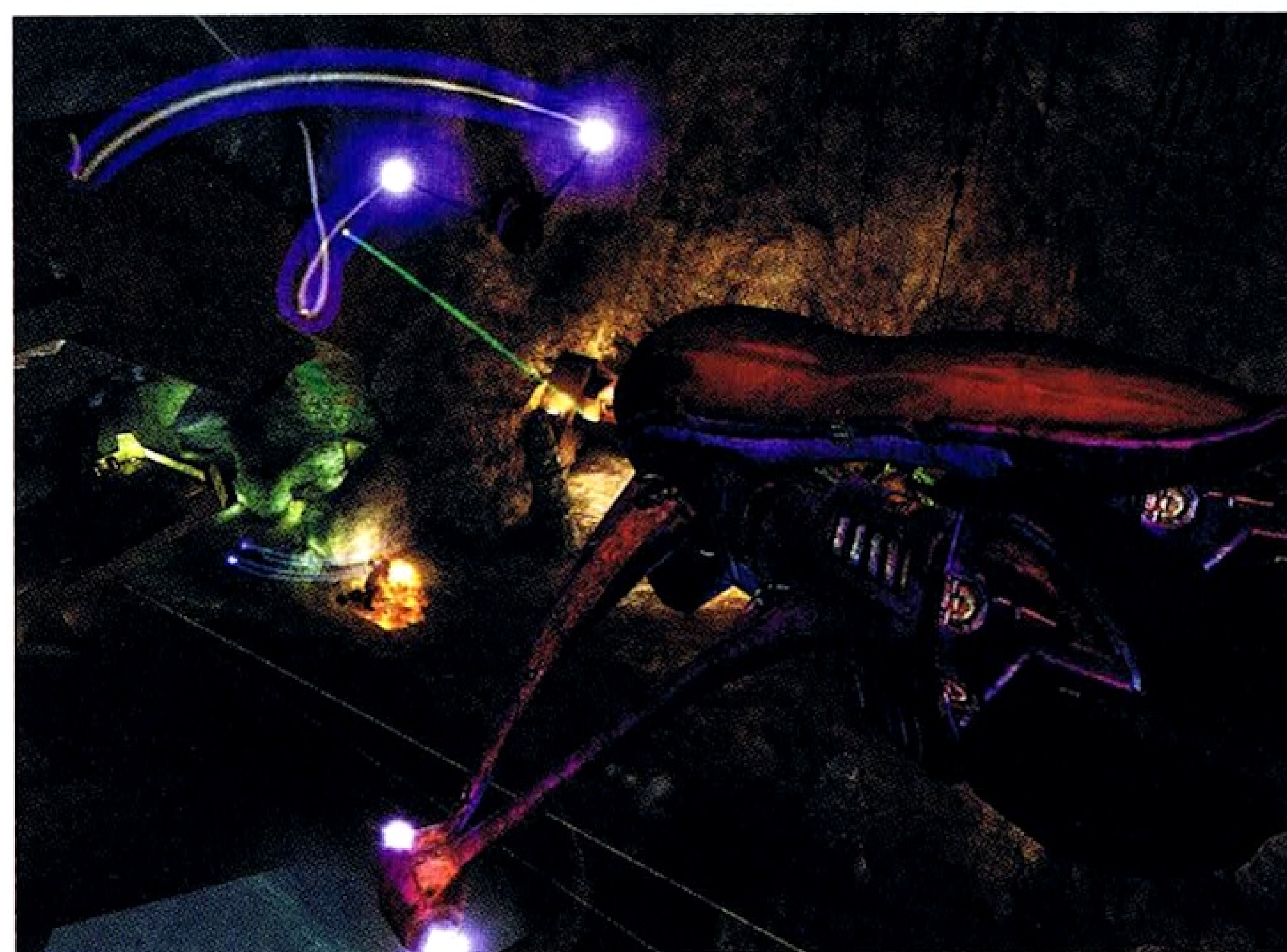








Though the singleplayer game has still not been shown off outside of Bungie's walls, the company is keen to emphasise that the AI has been overhauled and improved for the sequel. We shall see



We're given a tour around Bungie's offices, which is amusing if only to watch journalists trying on full-size Master Chief costumes. That aside, it's unlike any developer we've visited. Not because it's powered by state-of-the-art technology or decorated like a plush New York apartment, but because there's no one here. Well, hardly anyone. Turns out most of the staff work the hours they want to maximise their creative energies. Clearly, one o'clock in the afternoon is a bit early for most.

"Everyone at Bungie works incredibly hard," our guide assures us. "And everyone is pretty much responsible for their own part of the game. As you can imagine, there have been a lot of late nights recently and still more to come."

At least the absence of staff members means we get longer to digest the contents of whiteboards and concept art hanging on partitions as we move around. How about this for a *Halo 2* creature you've never heard of before: a Drinol Beast, a sort of hairless, grey monster with one eye – although there are other drawings of it with two eyes so you can't take for granted that it's going to make the final game. And then there's Bungie's twisted sense of humour to take into account. We wouldn't put it past the company to put a few red herrings around the place, just for a laugh. However, one whiteboard does catch our eye, chiefly because it's out of the way and unprepossessing. 'Block 4' is the title, followed by four subheadings: 'Spacestation', 'Flood Lab', 'Forerunner ship', and 'Delta Control'. Just a nugget like this is enough to whip fans into frenzies.

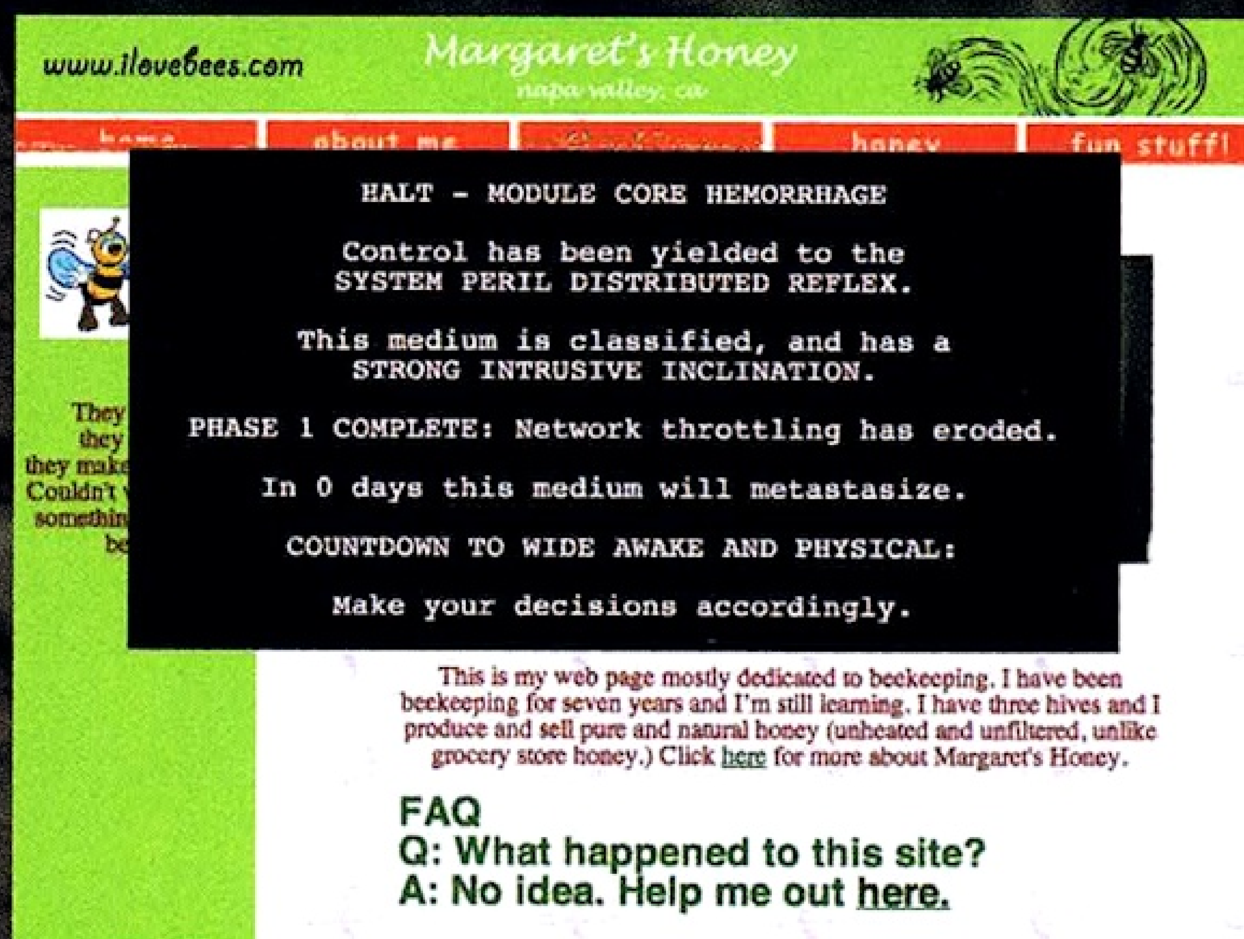
One whiteboard catches our eye. 'Block 4' is the title, followed by 'Spacestation, 'Flood Lab', 'Forerunner ship', and 'Delta Control'

So far, there's little to indicate what makes Bungie special. Can it just be down to trust? The idea of responsibility is key to Parsons: "It's hard to define exactly why Bungie is special. Let's put it this way: the company only recruits the best, and there's very definitely a culture of responsibility here. It makes or breaks them. People work hard for the team but they're also working hard for themselves… they'll have a particular feature to solve or idea they want

The honey pot

Bungie's playful approach to marketing has recently been demonstrated in its www.ilovebees.com viral campaign. Although Parsons feigns ignorance on the subject – "We don't get the chance to read the internet," he says roguishly – it's clear from Bungie.net's weekly updates that this isn't the case.

Download the latest trailer of *Halo 2* and towards the conclusion you'll note Bungie's URL alters to www.ilovebees.com for a brief moment. Accessing this unassuming beekeepers' site then provokes a hacked error message that has set many a forum buzzing. Technobabble combined with a countdown clock has incited countless crackpot theories ranging from Microsoft releasing a downloadable multiplayer level of *Halo 2* to Cortana carrying a virus that could devastate Earth. By the time you read this you'll know whether all the fuss was worth it.



to flesh out. Also, the organic way we build the game also encourages creativity."

Parsons is an energetic evangelist for the game and seems genuinely excited about playing it himself. A large room is set aside at Bungie's HQ for an entire day of multiplayer *Halo 2* gaming. Noticeably, Parsons is jumping into any vacated seat, getting stuck in and generally dragging up the averages of those away eating pizza.

We're treated to three new multiplayer levels of *Halo 2*, plus the Zanzibar map first showcased at this year's E3. Although there's a mood of disappointment that there's no singleplayer level on show, it's short lived. No one complains once the headsets go on and the slaying begins. (The headsets are noticeably different, with a higher build quality and adjustable parts so that they fit snugly into even the oddest-shaped ear. They will be released alongside the game.) The three new maps give a good indication of how much Bungie has improved the multiplayer component of *Halo*. It's familiar yet more complex and satisfying. Parsons describes it aptly: "When you pick up *Halo 2* we want people to think of it as an old friend. It has all the same clothes, but a new haircut and a wad of cash in the pocket." Maybe we're not so impressed by a friend fresh out of the barbers waving a fistful of cash around, but we get the point.

Bungie does let on that the architecture contained in the maps gives a flavour of what's to appear in the game proper. Which is interesting as one arena takes place in what appears to be a large Covenant craft. It's broadly cylindrical, with purple and pink paths twisting around the outer rim and up to an overhead footbridge. It's the smallest of the maps we play and even with just a handful of players it's difficult to move a few paces without meeting a foe face to face.

The second consists of a series of ramps zigzagging their way up to a large square platform; there's also a jump pad that can take you from the lowest level up to the top in an instant. It's a more precarious environment and a couple of Covenant swords ensure that close melee combat is a significant factor. The final map is the largest, boasting a central atrium complete with huge pool and coconut palms. Several passages, rooms, high balconies and alcoves surround this area. The rocket launcher is the most devastating weapon here, and explosive canisters littered around the labyrinthine corridors ensure that one stray bullet or grenade can get you a kill, or killed.

"When you pick up Halo 2 we want people to think of it as an old friend. It has all the same clothes, but a new haircut and a wad of cash"

In terms of balancing, there appears to be no fatal flaw. The dual-weapon wielding is fantastically cathartic, but the inability to use grenades and the reduced accuracy (pressing both triggers simultaneously causes your aim to move upwards) can be a bitter pill to swallow. Discovering powerful

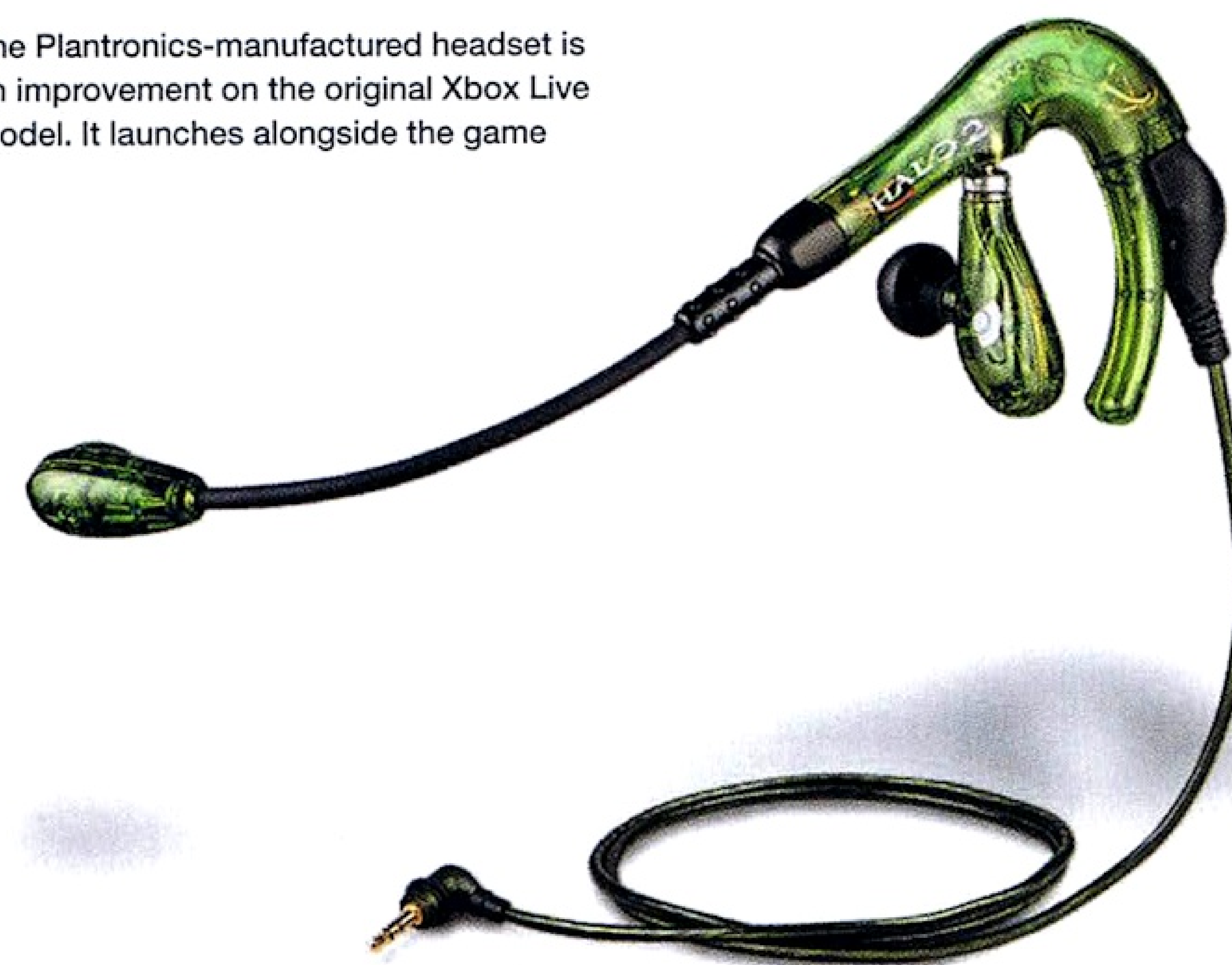
weapon combinations is half the fun. A charged blast of the Covenant pulse pistol followed by unloading a full clip from the new sub-machinegun into an enemy is absolutely devastating, but just as you're getting cocky a rival will annihilate you with one slice from the plasma sword that has featured so prominently in Bungie's hype.

Noticeably, the shield recharges much quicker than in *Halo*, and the needle gun fires at almost twice the rate. Alterations such as these encourage confrontation rather than camping. On the levels we played weapon sets and game types were locked, but none of the maps became even the slightest bit tedious. A greater emphasis on environmental damage – even the coconuts can be shot to the ground – made for more tactile and engrossing playgrounds to fight in.

In short, despite playing these levels on Slayer over and over again, they felt like a mere taste of what's to come.

One of *Halo*'s greatest strengths was the ability to customise and tweak almost every facet in the multiplayer setup. It's the aspect that's kept it fresh where every other console multiplayer mode has gone stale after a few months. Bungie not only promises that the rich level of customisation seen in *Halo* is to return, but also that completely new game types will be introduced. Parsons believes Oddball will seem tame by comparison.

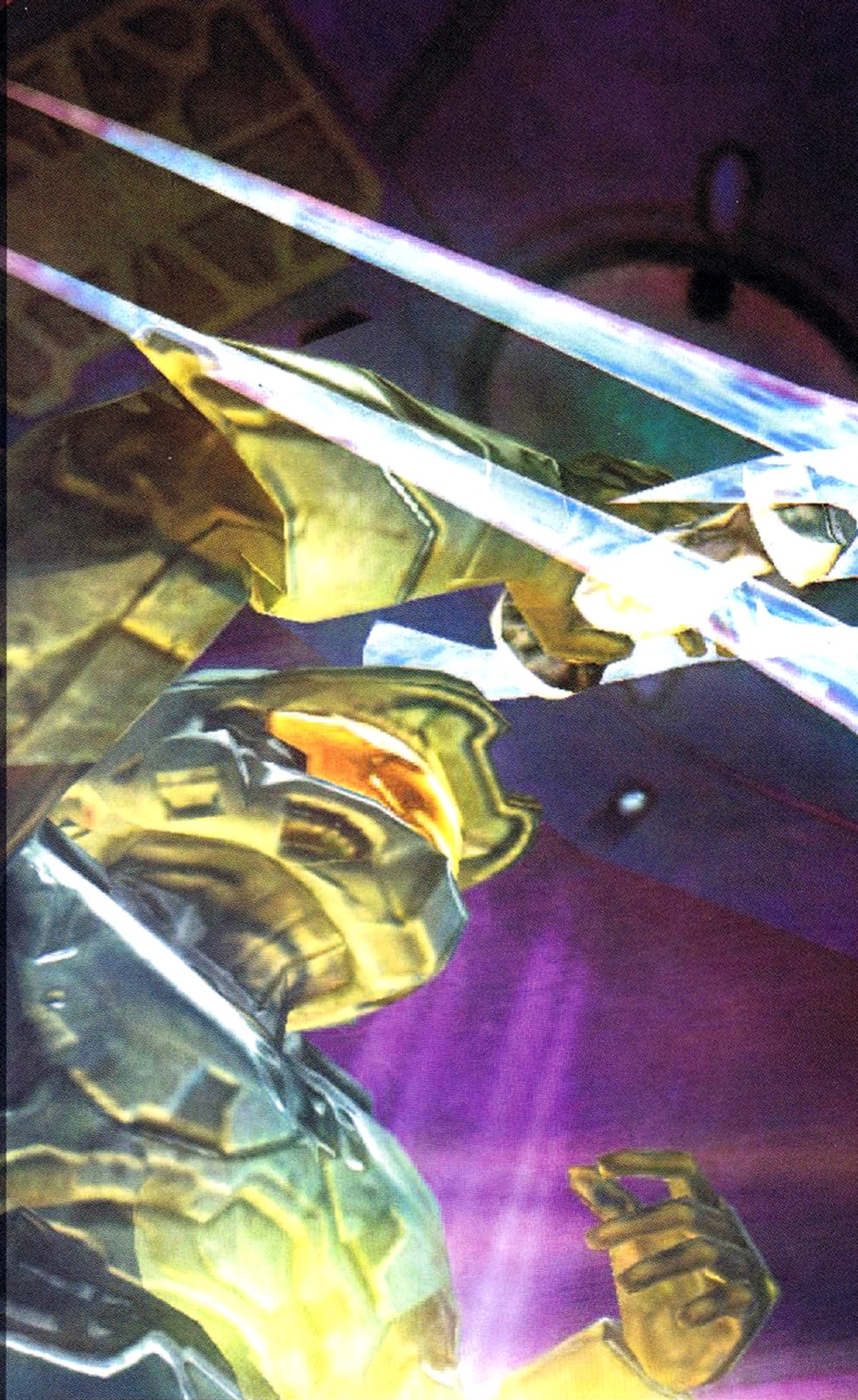
"We're going to give gamers some crazy shit online," he adds excitedly. "If I have one message, it's get yourself a good router. We're going to support fans by adjusting playlists and keeping them informed about exactly how well they're doing." Bungie hopes to build a community by encouraging people to view a



The Plantronics-manufactured headset is an improvement on the original Xbox Live model. It launches alongside the game



Bungie studio manager Pete Parsons (centre left of photo, in white T-shirt, with hands on hips) claims the company employs only the best. And those willing to do a little dressing up, clearly



breakdown of their stats at its own website. It's a clever way to highlight the brand, sure, but there should be a genuine pleasure derived from poring over your game statistics in fine detail – who you played against, on what map at what time, and cross-referencing with those of rivals.

Only when it comes to balancing does Parsons sound a note of panic: "It's a mammoth job, and every time I look at the calendar that November release date jumps out." Changing to dual-weapon wielding is one thing, but introducing vehicle damage must have been an agonising decision. "Oh, it was, but I think we made the right choice. You know, when you have a game and one person is using a ghost as a lawnmower for the entire match it can get annoying. You now have to use vehicles much more tactically and being able to board them adds yet another dimension."

Although the office is less than half-empty during our visit (it's also a Saturday) Parsons is keen to stress how much work is going in to the game during the final phase: "It's flat out and people are putting in very long days. Everyone is fully committed to the game." Parsons is not your typical PR man, as his enthusiasm to play the game testifies. "When we finish we're all going to take a long nap," he concludes. "We'll have some kind of party, but, actually, we're looking forward to playing online with gamers."

We went to Bungie hoping to discover what made it special. Cue visions of creative meetings held in rooms lined with beanbags, or conversely, an authoritarian regime complete with workers' cells and a strict chain of command. But, prosaic as it sounds, Bungie, despite the absence of employees during the visit, is just like any every other developer.

Except every other developer wasn't responsible for *Halo*.

But is Bungie in danger of being known for one game alone? "No way," Parsons finishes adamantly. Does it have other games in development? "You just wait and see."



"When we finish we'll have a long nap and then some kind of party, but, actually, we're looking forward to playing online with gamers"



All *Halo*'s vehicles return in the new multiplayer arenas, but now they perish under intense fire. Boarding craft and knocking pilots out of their seats will become a beloved tactic


Judging by this image, the flamethrower, cut from *Halo* towards the end of development, could make it into the sequel. However, it has not been present during the game's beta


New gameplay tweaks include armour that crackles when the shield is down, a longer, higher jump, guided rockets and a speed-boost facility on many vehicles



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Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Silent Hill 3
After the confused fourth title, replaying this self-aware, Lynchian road trip to hell reveals a team at the height of their confidence – and some fresh shocks.


(PS2) Konami

Vagrant Story
Matsuno's love-or-hate epic takes on a new light when seen as a precursor to *Final Fantasy XII*. It's a shame *VS* never had an *FF*-sized budget, though.


(PS1) Square

Metroid Prime
A trip back to the Samus' first GC adventure was essential this month. And it's aged well, not least in terms of its graphics, which positively glisten.


(GC) Nintendo

Call Of Duty
The singleplayer game was exhausted many moons ago, of course, but with the United Offensive code arriving a day after deadline, we're brushing up.


(PC) Activision

Rewriting History

Is reviving an old classic an impossible task?

When you pioneer or redefine something with a flash of brilliance, you reap the benefits of preconceived quality, but suffer the curse of ludicrous expectation. It happened to Ion Storm with Deus Ex, and how brutally unfair was that. A whole mess of PC gamers dismissing the title because the HUD didn't work the same way.

Now Id Software are unlikely to cop the same sort of flak from its stalwart supporters because Doom 3 is nothing like its predecessors. Never mind the graphics, it's the challenge itself that bears next to no resemblence to the old 2.5D shooter. The player never feared any one adversary in Doom, except perhaps the Cyberdemon and an Arch-Vile that caught the player with not a scrap of cover in sight. Terror came in waves, not in ones and twos.

There is no denying that Carmack has once again fashioned the most advanced 3D engine around in gaming, and although the move to consciously gear a game for atmosphere is something we not only condone, but actively encourage here. We've already talked to more than few FPS fans that are disappointed. There's none of the frenetic pace, and rarely a point that there isn't somewhere safer to run. Unnavoidable as it is, Id have unconsciously paid attention to those they have inspired over the years, working in elements like the PDA as a means to keep track of game info. Was the original Doom any less of a classic without it? More to the point, is Doom 3 any better for having it? What's more fun, introducing Imps to your boomstick or searching through emails for a three digit number? That's not depth, that's jumping through hoops.

Now look at the Sims 2, it's taken what was a essentially a glorified interior decorator application, and turned it into a game that's got the same enthralling appeal, depth and variety of outcomes as the old text-based Alter-Ego to suck in the hardcore, without losing the basic charms that won over the easily amused mainstream. The secret? Strike while the iron is lukewarm or tepid at its coldest, otherwise you may risk simply offending those who sang your praises for so many years, alienating them with a game that simply has no hope of truly reminding them of what they once loved.

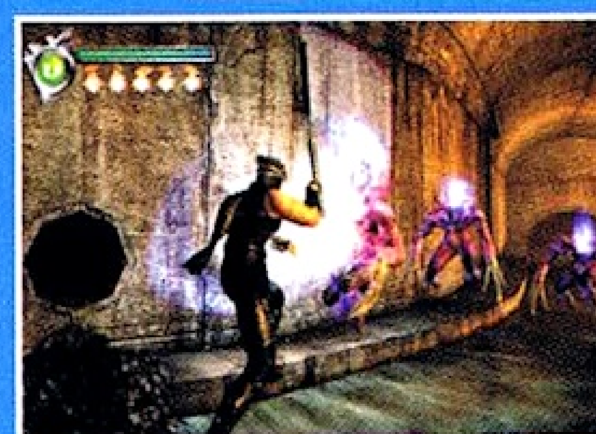














Fable

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Big Blue Box/Lionhead Studios** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out Now (US), October (Australia)**



Even Fable isn't immune to the odd conventions of video game role-playing. Players must inevitably collect the green-glowing Experience Orbs if they're to build up their skill.





There's a lot of fun to be had playing the role of a villain, especially when it comes to costume design. Hair style, facial hair, tattoos and different combinations of clothing can make the Hero look quite menacing.



Five years in the making, Peter Molyneux's Fable carries Microsoft's hopes and dreams of procuring a viable audience for role-playing games on Xbox. *Black & White* didn't inspire a great deal of confidence, though, and they were beaten to the punch by Bioware's *Knights of the Old Republic*. But Big Blue Box have remained fixed to their vision of a game where active feedback will affect one's playing style and, fittingly, *Fable* is a genuinely unique game.

Fable breaks from many of the common conventions of role-play. One cannot randomly search through bookshelves or smash wooden barrows in search of food and armour without being slapped on the wrist. Likewise, there is nothing to stop players from summarily murdering anything that breathes save the possibility of being caught, beaten, fined and thrown out of town by the guards. This is all part of an active feedback system where NPCs will remember your behaviour, spread it to each other through word of mouth and eventually forget it through the passage of time. Rescue a lost child, and women will throw themselves at your feet. Slay a merchant who overcharged for a pair of chainmail boots, and you'll be declared a villain.

As amusing as it is to be known as "Arrow Dodger", "Chicken Chaser" and "Arseface", it's even more interesting to know that these labels function on a superficial, if stereotypical level. One's choice of apparel, hairstyle, facial hair, weight and tattoos will alter one's attractiveness and alignment towards good and evil. The feedback from the NPCs is instantaneous and voluntary, a constant reminder of one's standing between good and evil.

At an internal level, character development is split between melee combat, archery and magic. These are each subdivided into a further three categories including health, physique, guile and speed. Magic spells can attack, summon demons and enhance the hero's combat skills. The more one leans towards a particular discipline of combat, the further their hero will develop in that direction. Therefore, experience gained while fighting with a melee weapon is restricted to levelling up the melee category of character attributes; and likewise for archery and magic. Conveniently, the hero also earns general experience which can be distributed at the player's discretion.

Combat is unexpectedly one of the more rewarding aspect of the game. The controls are comfortably responsive, giving the player enough flexibility to move between mace-swinging, arrow-flinging and lightning-

Between the monster-killing and costume-buying is the unnecessary but wholly unavoidable social simulation.











Fable isn't short on dark humour. Not only can time be spent kicking about the local village chickens, one can also give decapitated heads the boot.

shooting in a skirmish. Hobbes, balverines, rock trolls, bandits and the occasional giant wasp will ambush the hero from all angles, and they possess the smarts to realise there's a fight happening within close proximity of them. Quests, accepted at the Guild of Heroes, can occasionally be failed as a result of their meddling, but the game is never too difficult unless a boast or two has been made as to how the mission will be accomplished. These boasts include performing a mission naked, with bare hands or surviving without a scratch.

Between the monster-killing and costume-buying is the unnecessary but wholly unavoidable social simulation. Women (and men) can be wooed and married; houses and shops can be bought and renovated; and merchants from across the land can be bartered with for a profit. Lingering for a while longer in the towns will reveal bribery, theft, pub games, hair stylists and tattoo artists, as well as a most ironic form of escapism from escapism: beer. Players can literally drink themselves blind.

Abe's Oddysee-inspired social expressions, used to interact with NPCs, are mostly passive and inconsequential, ranging from giggling and belching to striking manly poses and giving someone the finger. Other expressions like offering a gift or issuing a "follow me" instruction occasionally produces meaningful outcomes, but all NPC characters ultimately react according to the same spreadsheet of responses that depend on the alignment, attractiveness and reputation of the hero. And at the end of the day, results-driven players will find that nothing is quite as effective as killing an NPC and stealing the booty.

Fable's virtual world as visually breathtaking as it is ripe for exploration. As though taken from the pages of a fairytale storybook, *Fable* is a child's imagination brought to life as it takes players through castles, dungeons, haunted forests and rustic country towns. The atmosphere never ceases to overwhelm with its graphical detail and animated AI routines. Watch in wonder at a guard who lights the town lanterns at dusk and puts them out at sunrise.

Unfortunately, none of this can hide the weak storyline. It's short, it can be rifled through in 15 hours and it's not terribly interesting unless you take your fantasy with vanilla. There is the option to continue playing or even restart to become something different (like an assassin or a thief), but one's desire to do so is limited. Character interactions are token, the flow of conversations cannot be directed and the quests can only completed in one way, boasts notwithstanding. But if you are vain enough to indulge in virtual cosmetics and *Sims*-style character management, you'll discover a hero worth caring about and a game that's as intelligent and funny as it's trying to be.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten



Showing Signs of Age

The Hero will age in real time, growing taller, bulkier and hairier. His hair will eventually turn shock white as well. Since magic causes such a huge physical and mental strain, the hero age even faster the more he makes use of his magic powers. Once the maximum age is hit, the Hero will be perpetually trapped in that age until players are sick of the sight of him and decide to start a new game.

Doom 3

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **id Software** Price: **$89.95** Release: **Out now**



True to source, the imps remain your most relentless enemy, boiling out of dark corners and hemming you in

Forget pain, suffering and death, *Doom 3* is about fear. Primal fear. The dark, the unknown. Flickering lights, gloomy corners, half-glimpsed movement. It's about trying to distinguish a groan from a creaking pipe; a slumped figure who may or may not rear up as you walk by; a constant verse-chorus of uneasy calm followed by a desperate battle for survival.

Plot-wise, this is a redux of the original *Doom*. You're the new guy at a huge waste-reprocessing facility on Mars. Following some military meddling with matter transference, the base has been overrun with nightmarish beasties and it's down to you to tool up and take them on.

However, the story isn't the only redux. The theory behind *Doom 3* is that this is *Doom* cubed; all the charisma and raw thrill of the original game transposed into the 21st century. In practice, things are somewhat more complex. Visually, despite the truly arresting perfection of the environments, this isn't a recreation of the B-movie brashness of the original: *Doom 3*'s aesthetic achievements are muted by its functional take on the future. Initially underwhelming, this restraint emphasises the body horror once hell spills over into the base, squirming umbilical cords violating the sterile corridors.

Nor does the pace of the combat mimic your memories. *Doom 3* drip-feeds measured confrontations, a contrast to the extravagant attrition of the first game. Rather than being a remake of the *Doom* that millions loved, this is a remake of the *Doom* we never saw, the *Doom* id hoped to make but couldn't. Now every encounter has the potential to drive you to the edge of your seat, every enemy representing an intimate, lethal threat.

Again, these enemies are mostly original *Doom* upgrades with some hideous, *Quake*-style zombie-animal hybrids thrown in. The mutant grunts tend to keep their distance behind cover, but it's nothing you could really call 'AI'. Mostly, everything scuttles out from the shadows and steams in without any self regard, hunting you down wherever you hide. It's kill or be killed. Again and again and again. And again.

This is where some of the first doubts



start to set in. The reliance on contrived event scripting in a game whose manual encourages you to depend on quicksaving can rapidly undermine your queasy nervousness. Repeating sections round for round and move for move until perfected makes a mockery of the carefully constructed suspense. The tight funnelling of the claustrophobic environments, so crucial for the game's mood, also severely reduces your tactical options during firefights. *Doom* was always a corridor shooter, but now, even in more elaborate environments, there's often literally no room for manoeuvre.

Manoeuvring, however, was only ever a means to an end, and that end remains the killing which was always the cathartic heart of *Doom*'s appeal. All the old weapons are present and politically incorrect: shotgun, chaingun, plasma rifle, rocket launcher and, most thrillingly, a deluxe edition of the chainsaw that chews up the hardiest hellspawn. The controversial decision to force you to toggle between flashlight and weapon was clearly intended to amplify the player's sense of vulnerability. It accomplishes this, but at the price of an absurd and cheap conceit. It's a vulnerability brought about solely by a whim of the developer rather than arising from the situation and, as such, can soon provoke resentment.

This cheapness is also a feature of the game's rudimentary puzzles. Personnel PDAs must be found and plundered for door codes, fleshing out the story as you go. It can be a powerfully emotional system: let a dead soldier's voice log play as you explore and his cheery mundanities echo chillingly off





The requirement to toggle your torch is less frustrating once you upgrade to weapons which require two hands

Rather than a remake of the Doom that millions loved, this is a remake of the Doom we never saw, the Doom id hoped to make but couldn't















Taking a hit sends you reeling, disorientating you and occasionally slamming you down stairs and over ledges. Keep your distance





blank metal walls. As a mechanic, however, it's too obviously a meaningless elaboration of 'find green key to open green door'.

Other niggles break the painstakingly crafted atmosphere. Some sections feel pointless and tacked-on: a tedious barrel-loading minigame; an interminable sequence of faffing with a mechanical platform. Most annoyingly, when the monsters die, they lose all sense of weight and disintegrate to ash with indecent speed.

There's no question that id knows its audience. Although the game's simplicity caters for newcomers in a perfectly intuitive way, the team realises that original *Doom* fans will poke around in dark corners, expecting to find health/armour upgrades and secret areas. And also expecting, with perhaps a little more nostalgia than genuine dread, a zombie to spring up behind them while they do. There are also plenty of in-jokes and back-references buried away in the petty bureaucracies, a worthwhile reward for those keen to devour every crumb of PDA detail.

Even these complaints, however, can't entirely erode *Doom*'s accomplished terror. It's impossible for your heart not to race as you sweat out the fright of its peerless audio design, chattering voices and muffled sobs endlessly scraping at your senses. It's this that makes irrelevant the debates of how *Doom* is *Doom*. Terror is the surest badge of *Doom 3*'s heritage: this is a tense, ultraviolent action game which demands you revisit the way we played the original game: off with the lights, on with the headphones, and up with the volume.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

The Sims 2

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Maxis** Price: **$89.95** Release: **September 17**





The Sims 2 is an advert for self improvement. The fitter and better read a Sim becomes, the more successful they will be in life. But they'll need to chill out and play some PC games, too

Who could have foretold that *The Sims* would become such a huge, singular hit? It has had few worthy competitors in its self-created genre, certainly none that can repeat its staggering financial success, and Maxis looks set to repeat this chart-topping accomplishment with its people-managing sequel. From the first few moments of chatting, flirting and interior decorating, *The Sims 2* is delightful.

A new 3D engine creates visuals worthy of modern PCs, but it also provides direct and immediate access to a simulation of modern domesticity that is both subtle and awesome in its complexity. Each Sim is a near-perfect virtual pet. Free-willed enough to go about their most mundane duties, they nevertheless require the beneficent hand of the gamer god to guide them to happiness, success and the occasional much-needed shower. This process of day-to-day 'living' now boasts considerably more depth and diversity than in *The Sims*' previous incarnation. Each Sim has a basic set of traits that will dictate their domestic habits and social propensities, but they also now have a set of wants and fears that will guide their overall mood within the parameters of an overall life-building aspiration.

A Sim's handful of immediate goals need to be addressed each and every day if they're going to feel successful. This might be as simple as having a chat with someone on MSN or having a couch bought for them. It might be a grander, more difficult endeavour, such as having an affair with a local beauty, or bringing home enough cash to afford some of the dazzling consumer luxuries (flatscreen TV, four-poster bed) that make a Sim's house a luxurious home.

Succeed in these and a Sim's mood improves, making them better at performing the tasks to follow. These goals undergo constant change within the overall aspiration of the Sim's life. A child might simply want to play, but will still need to interact with an adult so that homework can be aced and bedtime stories lovingly told, before they are genuinely happy. A maturing teenager, on the other hand, might need to get busty Lucy into the hot-tub while still finding time to hang out with local Sim buddies. Watching him spurned for failing to balance these concerns may lead to his greatest fears being realised. If rejection by friends is his worst nightmare then his aspiration meter will plunge as they argue, and there will likely be tears or worse, so setting him right again will become an urgent priority. The range of options for providing for these needs, the actions the Sims can perform, the interactions that are possible, the careers that can be undertaken and the furnishings that can be purchased, makes up a bewildering array of possibilities.



General play consists of creating a family, putting them in a home and then developing their careers, relationships and environment in such a way that they will achieve their goals. The complexity of these tasks, along with a constant stream of storyline events and the possibilities of a whole neighbourhood of Sims living together, rapidly makes the scope of the game seem a little daunting. Ensuring that a busy 2.4-child family is running smoothly requires much attention, not least during social events such as parties (see 'Always party hard'). Moods will run high and fights or flings soon become inevitable.

All these events are designed to be as charming as possible – it's hard to dismiss the brilliance of the Sims joking and gossiping, or yelling and fighting. When two Sims lovingly clasp each other as they sleep, even the coldest gaming hearts will begin to melt. The Sims are all genuinely endearing, and this attachment makes all the labour of





Facial expressions and gestures are all highly animate, giving you a good idea of the condition of a Sim before you even glance at the information bars

When two Sims lovingly clasp each other as they sleep, even the coldest gaming hearts will begin to melt. The Sims are genuinely endearing















The range of activities the Sims can undertake is huge. Detailed TVs and chess sets add to the delight of watching them live their lives

managing their lives seem worthwhile. It's been said before, but the soap opera content of *The Sims* can quickly become more entertaining and more absurd than anything daytime TV can invent. Within moments of playing with one of the pre-built neighbourhoods the father of the family is juggling his relationship with his wife with his affair with the maid. Add two bickering teenage daughters to this volatile mix and it becomes quite clear why this is one stressed-out Sim. (Dealing with his predicament is a compelling challenge, especially when that maid is so cute…)

The Sims 2 simply drips with additional functions and features – not least of which is the movie-making interface, which allows players to record and edit moments of their Sim life to be kept as a video file and played back later. *Sims 2* players will be able to share their Sims stories with each other and to build up a life on film for their creations. Players are made to feel that they'll be able to achieve just about anything with the game, even though there's bound to be vast tracts of content to be added in expansion packs.

With all the arguments about videogame violence in the mainstream press, it's always pleasing to note that the biggest-selling modern PC game has been non-violent. Quietly rolling onwards with a highly accomplished project of sophisticated and emotive gaming, *The Sims 2* looks set to ensure that it stays that way.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Always party hard

The ambitious party can be a difficult event to get just right. It's even worse in Simsville and the result of a bad party can be devastating to the mood of the Sims involved. Get it right, win a fight and get intimate with the wealthy target of their affections, and the Sim's mood will soar. Points earned from successes can be spent on improving their environment. Get it all wrong, and the Sims will struggle with depression and damaged egos.

Second Sight

Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Codemasters** Developer: **Free Radical** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**





Character designs are boldly drawn, well-dressed and full of personality. Wiry Vattic is particularly likeable. The stock NPCs lack variety, though

With *TimeSplitters* and its sequel, Free Radical's staff seemed to struggle deliberately against the prevailing trends in FPS and action games, trends that they themselves had helped create in their work at Rare on *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*. Filmic style, narrative coherence and considered, tactical combat were all eschewed. In their place were frantic, twitchy arcade shooting and a charmingly silly kitchen-sink conceit that could accommodate every spoof and staple they could think of. The games were a defiantly uncool manifesto for a traditional gaming aesthetic (or lack of one), and though they divided opinion, many loved them for it.

So it's a surprise to find *Second Sight* sneaking out from under the noisy cover of EA's signing of *TimeSplitters 3*, for this paranormal spy thriller is all about stealth and story and a seamless, directed, singleplayer 'experience' – the very model of a modern videogame. Which is not to say that there's no family resemblance. *TimeSplitters* fans will feel at home with the funky flared character design, while the snowbound Russian base, the scattershot AK47 and the musical cues – even the telltale chirrup of the CCTV cameras – belong to an unbroken lineage stretching all the way back to *GoldenEye*. So cosy, so avuncular, so clearly Britsoft.

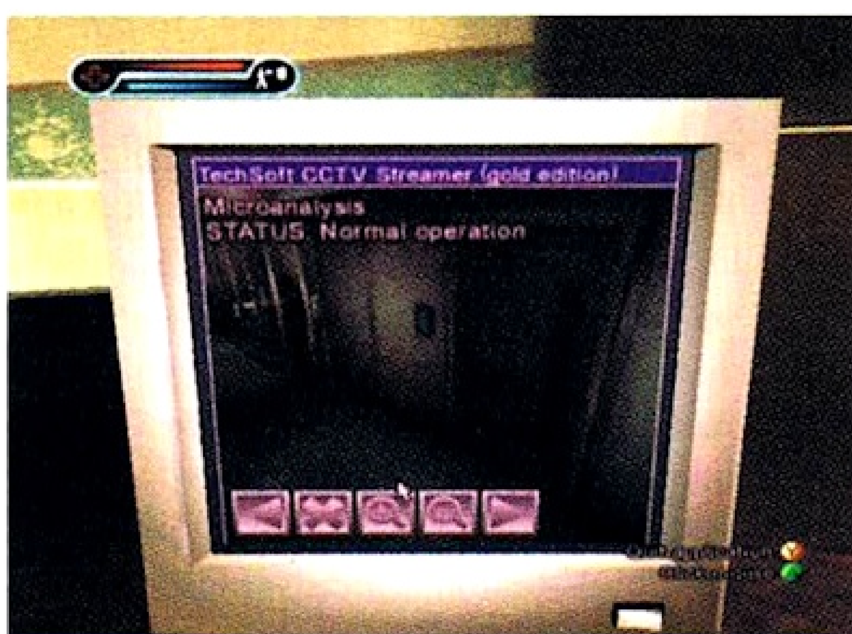
Crisp of cut-scene, Second Sight could well be a high water mark in storytelling through games (as opposed to storytelling around them)

The premise, the structure and the setting are all new, however, and substantially more voguish. Dr John Vattic awakes in a mysterious medical research facility to find he has amnesia and psychic powers – telekinesis, self-healing, shockwave attacks, projection of a ghost form and more. These are drip-fed to the player as Vattic makes his escape and investigates his own abduction, his past and his place in this web of intrigue coming back to him all the while in the form of punchy playable flashbacks. Handily, these include his secondment to a military special ops team and the attendant stealth and weapons training.



The plot is a pretty hokey sub-X-Files conspiracy, to be sure, but it's handled with genuine grace and economy, piquing and steadily rewarding interest without resorting to shock tactics or loudly telegraphed Big Secrets. Crisp of cut-scene, blessed with a refreshingly light touch and low-key compared to the po-faced chest-beating of its peers, *Second Sight* could well be a high water mark in storytelling through games (as opposed to storytelling around them). Its flashback technique recalls Silicon Knights' remarkable horror yarn *Eternal Darkness*, but it's far less grandiose, more focused in its application, and ultimately even more successful. Free Radical has taken to tale-spinning like the proverbial duck.

The same, sadly, cannot be said of its attempt at the ubiquitous stealth action. *Second Sight* lacks the radar or the camera flexibility for players to be aware of all threats to their secrecy. While it could be said that a certain level of frustration goes hand in hand with the quiet excitement of going unnoticed, that excitement is only there the first time, and endlessly restarting and replaying





Coloured circles clearly indicate which objects and people can be targeted or manipulated. Drawing weapons and ammo from across the room in the middle of a firefight is a smug kick











Though relatively low-tech and parsimonious with the polys, *Second Sight*'s visuals are clean and have total coherence in style, as well as consistent levels of detail – and that's something remarkably few art teams achieve

sections of motionless hiding is the very opposite of entertaining. So is the alternative – skulking in cupboards to wait out repeated security alerts. That the most disheartening sneaking sections come early in the game – during Vattic's escape and before he has a full compliment of psi powers – is a critical error in pace that threatens to kill the game for many players.

Far more successful is the armed combat, some of the best in any thirdperson actioner to date. The essential lock-on system is complimented with the ability to finesse your aim vertically, bringing the rich satisfaction of the smoothly timed headshot to this perspective. The weapons are familiar and masterfully realised (see 'Snipe snobbery'), cover is easy and fun to use, and the resulting firefights are an evocative and generous thrill.

Second Sight's supposed USP – the psychic abilities – are a more mixed blessing. Occasionally fiddly, they are slow to reveal their potential, especially since their use is only very occasionally required, leaving it up to the player to discover how best to wield Vattic's brain power. It's also a great shame that telekinesis, which should be the standout power, is let down by some tinnily unconvincing and buggy physics (one of several areas, also including audio, in which the game feels a little low-rent and dated).

But then, just as Vattic approaches a godlike ability to manipulate his world in later stages, the player gets comfortable and finds that tactical options are blown wide open, timid tedium replaced by scope for genuinely creative and cruel improvisation. The rush of omnipotence is heady indeed, and finally, perhaps just a little too late, *Second Sight* adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

Caught between the superior psychic physics of *Psi-Ops* and the bigger, brassier stealth-opera of *Riddick*, *Second Sight* may be a little too diverse, and et squeezed out. But it doesn't deserve to be. Despite its irritations and its occasionally threadbare set-dressing, this is a smart, fun, forward-thinking work, and a tale well told.



Edge rating: Seven out of ten



Snipe snobbery

If the shotgun and pistol are the meat and potatoes of videogame gunplay, then the sniper rifle is its haute cuisine: a refined, dramatic, guilty pleasure for the diner, and a chance for the chefs to show off. Happily, the expert virtual gunsmiths at Free Radical are more than up to integrating this headshot hedonism with locked-on thirdperson combat. An inset scope prevents a jarring perspective shift; a slow zoom on your prey teases the tastebuds; give those wandering crosshairs a judicious tweak and bang, the full flavour hits. Mmm.

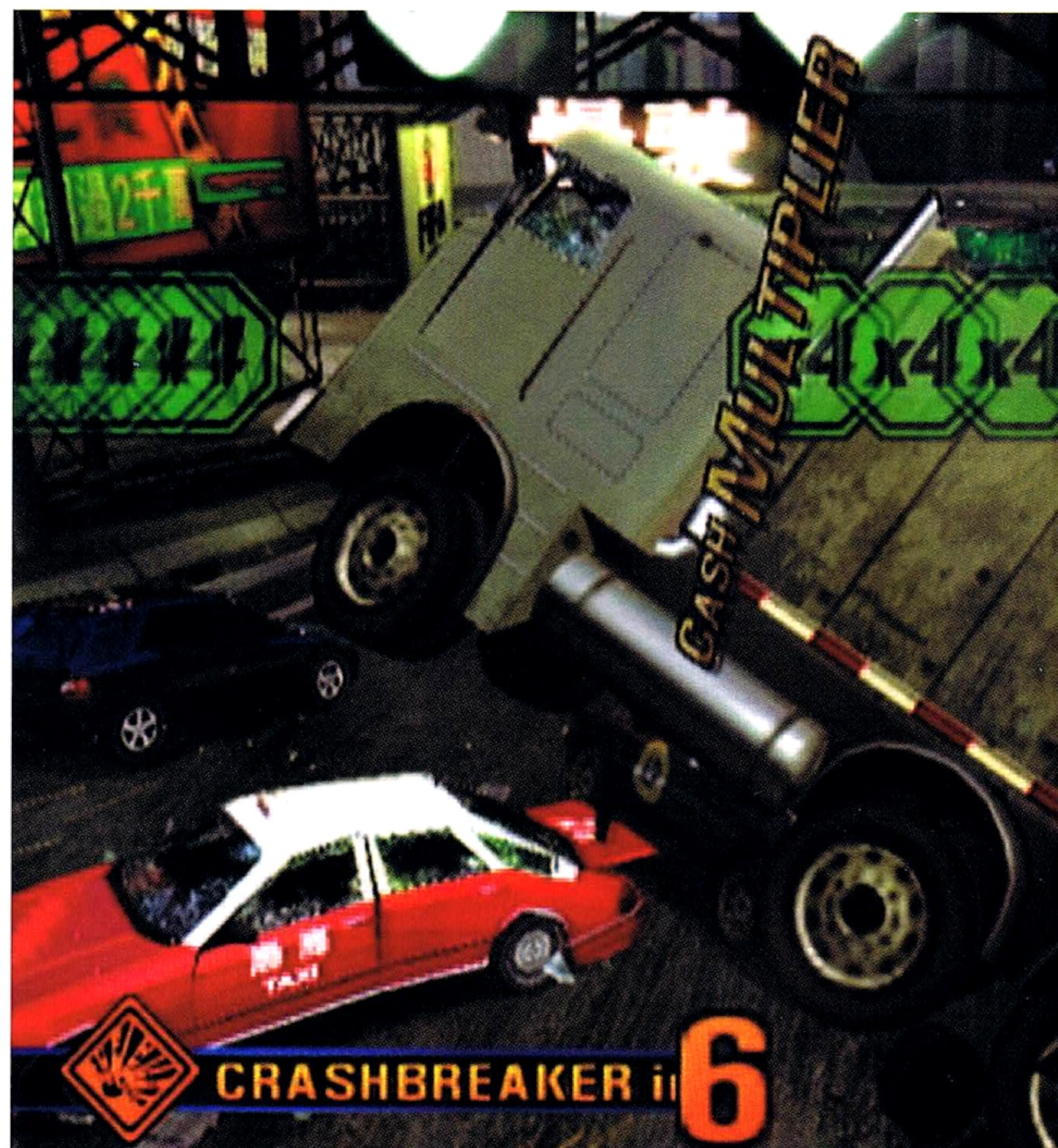
Burnout 3: Takedown

Format: **PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Criterion Games** Price: **$99.95** Release: **September 3**





One criticism would involve camera work. Crash mode replays rarely feature the most dramatic angle and the vision during Impact Time can be frustrating in the restrictions it puts on your view



The speed. Lord, the speed. *Takedown* could have the best environments yet seen in a racing title but you simply won't have time to notice them. The game's opening sections, even for seasoned *Burnout* aficionados, are utterly bewildering. There is a wealth of fresh information to take in – new road structures and a new driving dynamic thanks to immediate access to boost, regardless of whether the gauge is full or not, to name two – but it's the unusual velocity of the action that dazzles. You'll still be pondering how something can simultaneously feel so familiar and foreign when it hits you. Literally. You've barely managed 100 meters in your lowest-spec 160mph hot hatch and already the CPU competition is trying to bury you into the scenery or place you in the path of oncoming traffic. Not to be outwitted by the AI, you start to fight back, of course, and so begins the *Burnout 3* experience.

Now more complex and focused, Crash mode could easily present itself as a standalone product, so accomplished is its new form





Car models are far closer to their real life inspiration, and are far better for it

You'll already know that *Takedown* is all about aggressive driving. What you won't realise until you play it is how this shift in focus completely transforms the *Burnout* mechanic to the extent that it feels like an entirely different game. Racing takes a back seat to carnage as you face the fiercest opposition yet encountered in virtual racing. Let your primal instincts take over (they will whether you want them to or not) and it's not unusual to lose an event because you've become too involved in a race-long battle with the fifth-placed car to remember to fight your way to the front. It's only when you return to *Burnout 2* that you realise just how little CPU driver interaction there was before. Any notion of battling in *Takedown*'s predecessor was clearly player interpretation – opponents display a determination to get to the finish line first, sure, but no interest in you. Here, they don't just want to get past you, they want to hurt you as they do so.

Consequently, you'd better hurt them first. The incentive, other than attack being the best form of defence, is boost. Every offensive move – side-swiping, side-scraping, tailgating, shunting – is rewarded with the stuff (as are evasive manoeuvres and the usual oncoming traffic, near misses and drift elements). And in the wonderfully satisfying event of crashing them out of your way, termed a 'Takedown', you extend (and fill) your boost bar. Get taken down yourself and you lose a section of your gauge.

Coming off worst in an encounter with the competition isn't the end of the argument, and nothing characterises the combative spirit of *Burnout 3* better than an Aftertouch Takedown. Holding down the A button during a crash invokes Impact Time, slowing down the action and allowing you control of your sliding wreck. You can use this lengthy opportunity (depending on momentum, Impact Time can often last beyond 20 seconds) to orchestrate complex crash combinations utilising the traffic and any structures around you, although nothing proves as satisfying as taking down one of your rivals. Except for multiple Aftertouch Takedowns, of course – as with deft timing and coordination (as well as a little luck), double, triple and even quadruple forms of this last-ditch offensive are perfectly achievable, and only further reinforce the













One great new addition to the Crash mode is the car-mounted bomb you can set off, allowing you to guide your wreck to find still more victims, or perhaps pick up that elusive x4 multiplier icon

mechanic's standing as one of the game's brilliant and defining inclusions.

Its origin, of course, lies in Crash mode. *Burnout 2*'s party game of choice returns vastly enhanced, the addition of ramps, pick-ups and the aforementioned aftertouch has evolved it as much as the injection of the combat dynamic into the main game has radically altered the essence of *Takedown*'s predecessors. Now more complex and focused in design, Crash mode could easily present itself as a standalone product, so accomplished is its new form.

Takedown is accomplished all round. The extent of the developer's proficiency can be seen in the way the revised structure focuses on player reward. It will see you bounced around the globe as much as you are on the track, with events opening across three territories and offering an engaging mix of activities (you get to sample the IndyCar racing early on, which is a nice touch). Then there are the little gameplay enhancements: the way the oncoming traffic's headlights are permanently on to help visibility; how the green chevrons from previous *Burnout*s have been replaced by clearer, yellow-hued alternatives; the period of amnesty afforded to the player when placed back in the path of a civilian vehicle following the camera's violent pan back from displaying a successful Takedown (an interruption which can be switched off, as you'd hope).

At a time when, to many, developers' continued preoccupation with realism has removed the element of fun that characterised early racers and first attracted them to the genre, *Takedown* offers up a gargantuan gulp of the highest racing octane.

Until you've blasted along the gently curved outline of its European motorways via a delicate balance of brake and steering input (the accelerator never anything other than flat to the pad), nitrous flowing, gaze fixed firmly on the distance through burning eyes you daren't shut while carving your way through traffic and trading paint with the competition at 200mph or more, you won't have delved deep into *Takedown*'s core.

It still possesses the series' trademark ability to deliver *Tempest*-like 'in the zone' moments of remarkable intensity unlike any of its contemporaries, but now comes with a confidently revised dynamic, marking this as Criterion Games' finest hour. Crucially, it's everything a racing videogame should be: a relentless, unwavering and phenomenal assault on the senses.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten





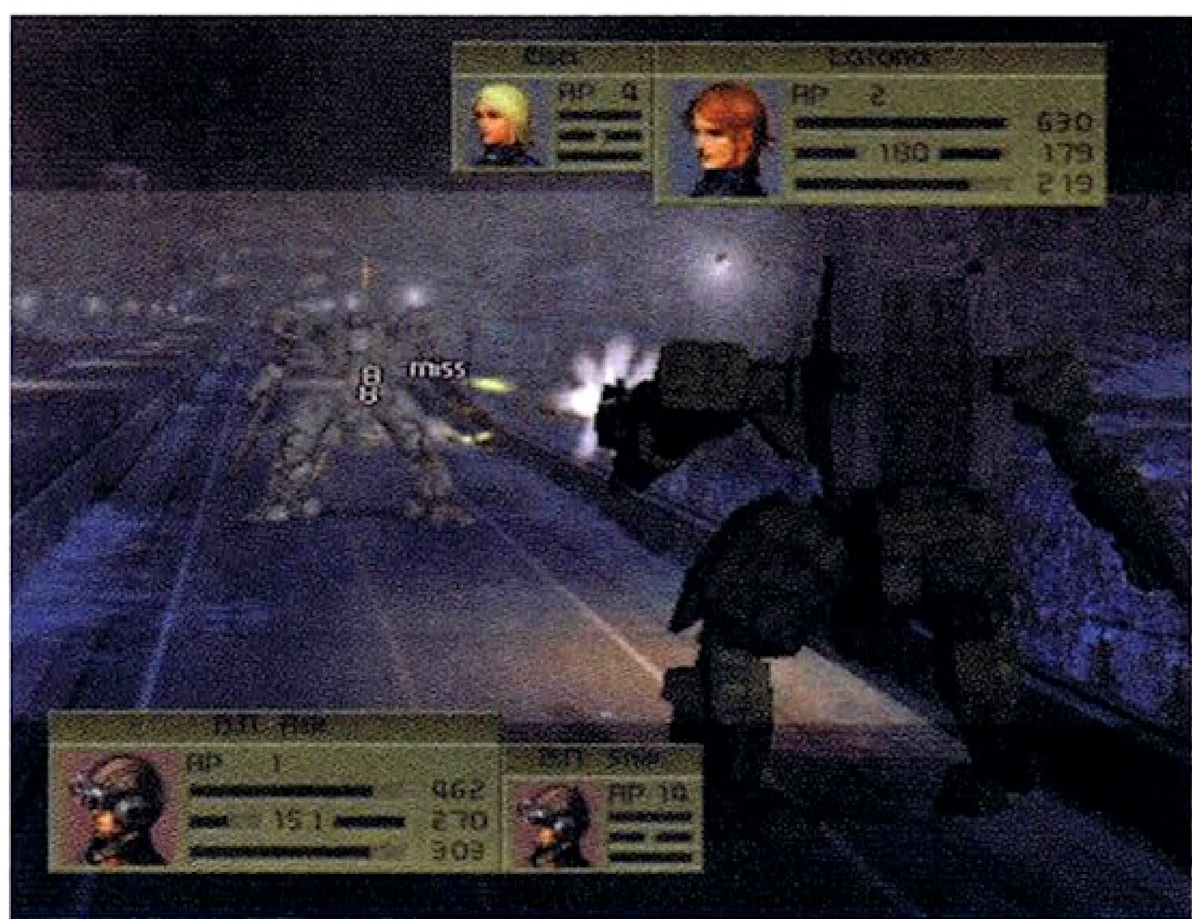
Team Takedown

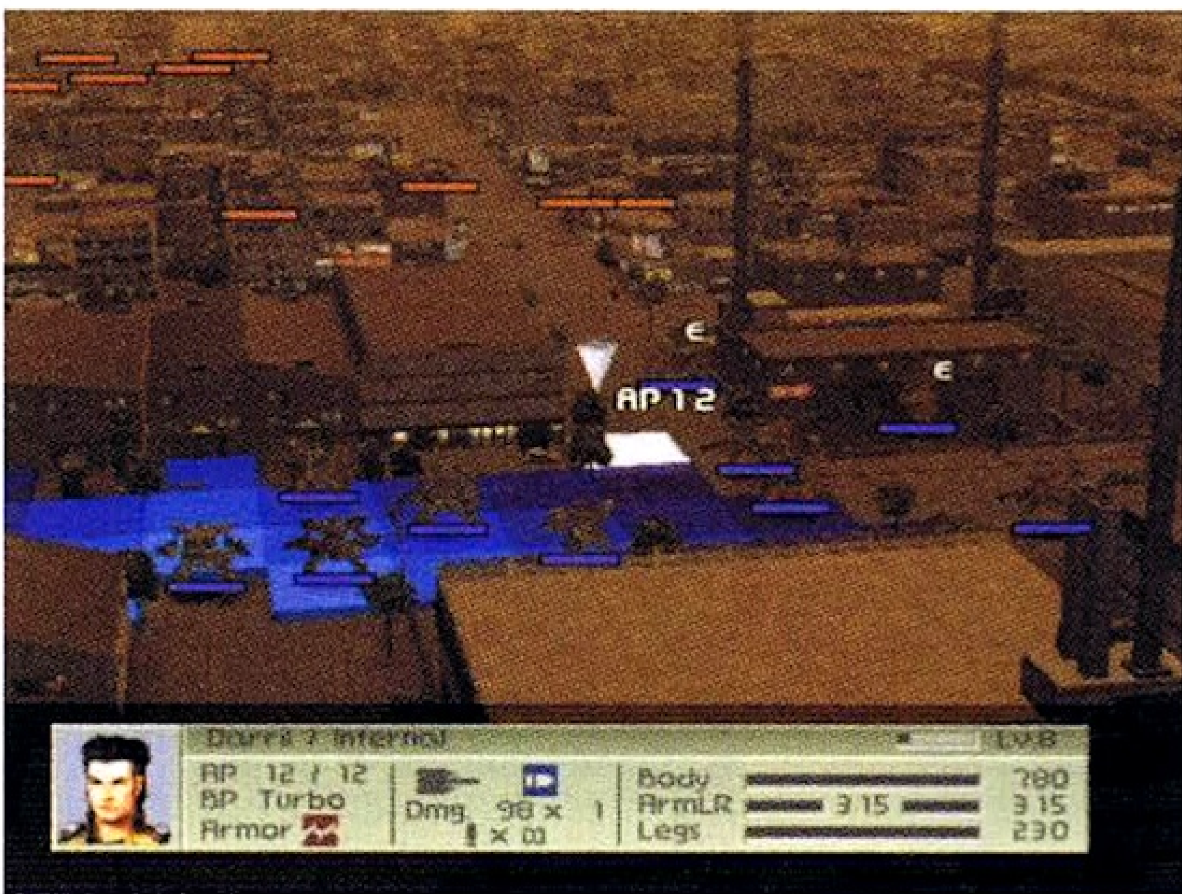
Offline multiplayer offers the singleplayer's Race and Road Rage options, but for real mayhem head for the Crash-based modes. Team Crush sees you coordinating simultaneous automotive massacres with a partner on any of the game's 100 Crash junctions, while Double Impact has you competing to grab the most points and pick-ups. Party mode offers the more traditional one-at-a-time approach. If splitscreen isn't your thing, get online. We haven't yet been able to test this element, but it offers all of the above plus specific modes such as Team Road Rage, so expect it to deliver on its massive potential.

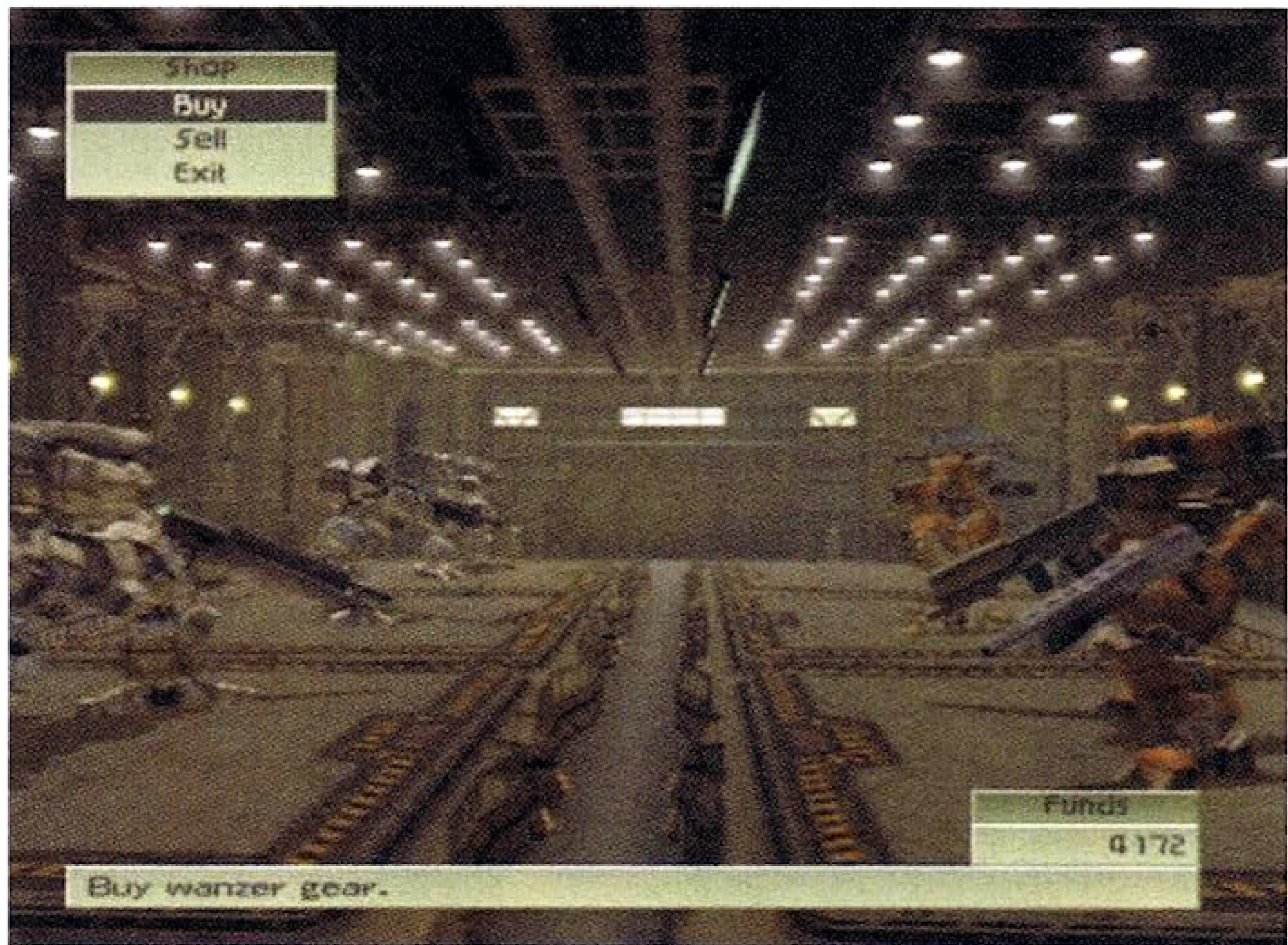
Front Mission 4

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Square-Enix** Developer: **In-house** Price: **US$50** Release: **Out now (US, Japan) TBC (AU)**







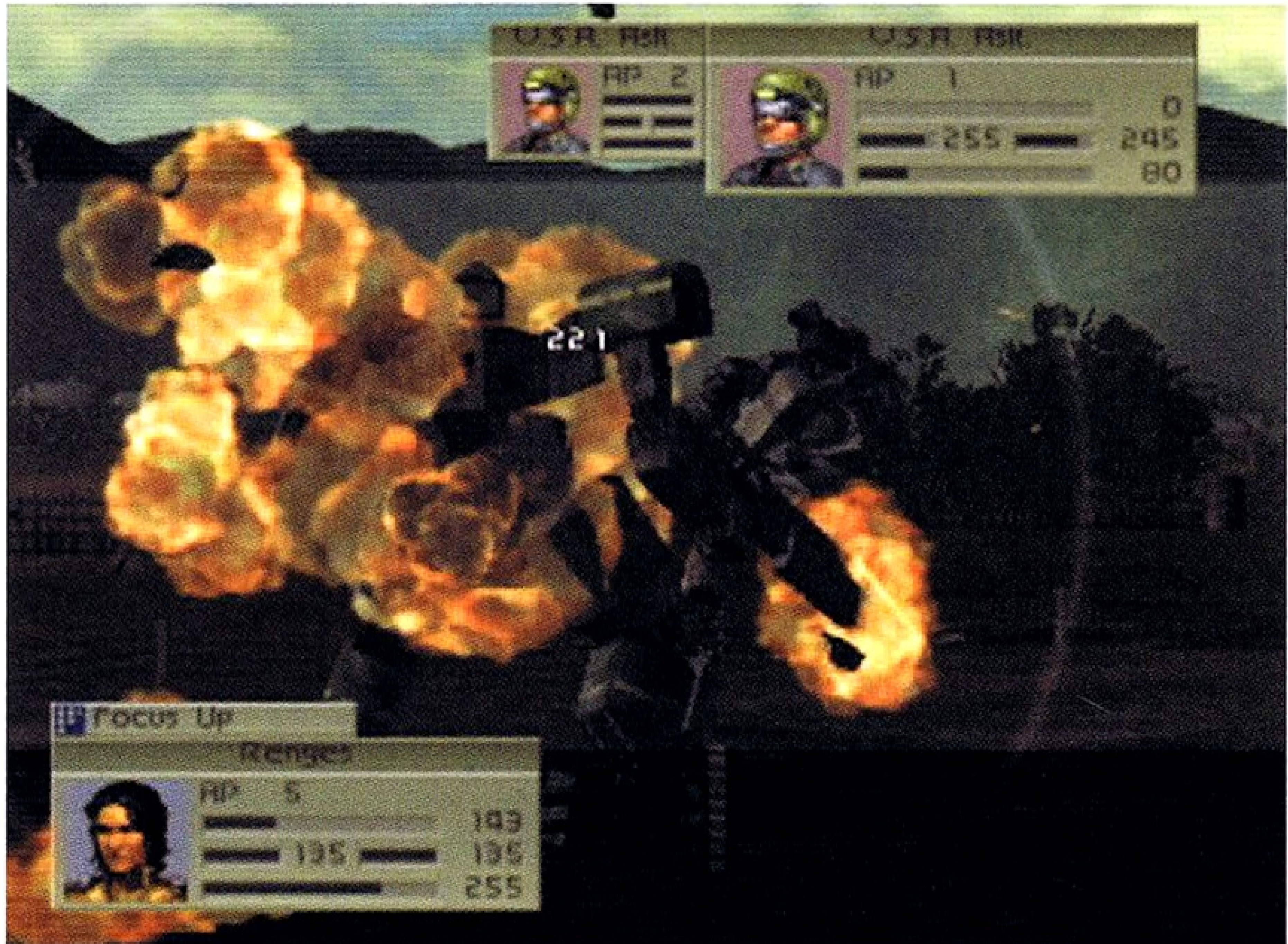


Some missions will see you fielding as many as ten units, but the ability to speed up or skip animation and quicksave mid-battle makes matters less dauntingly time-intensive



This is a test

Players can earn pilot experience and cash by replaying maps against a heavier enemy presence in the simulator. Some simulations are only unlocked by completing unlisted objectives in the main game – such as destroying fleeing enemy units or finishing maps under par – and these award secret weapons or parts. On top of the 29 story levels, the simulations provide nearly another game's worth of engagements.



FM4 is generally adept at positioning cameras for the most dramatic effect during attack animations. Felling enemies with a withering barrage or lethally accurate sniper round never fails to satisfy

Even with the five-year head start *Final Fantasy* has on *Front Mission*, the widening numerical gap between the two seminal series suggests sober near-future mech tactics are on the back foot to Technicolor fantasy melodrama. Rather than redress the balance, *FM4* takes itself even more stiflingly seriously, be it with the dry storyline, subdued visuals or rigid mechanics exhumed from carbonite.

Its world is largely cast in cold greys and hazy browns, and the military hardware that tracks through it is (intentionally) assembly-line functional rather than showily designed – but it's not without a spartan attractiveness. While the fully 3D battlefields make for a more solid, evocative experience, there's disappointingly little effect on gameplay: neither man-made nor natural features provide any interaction, even in the most one-sided sense of collapsing under fire or underfoot.

The biggest rewrite of the *Front Mission* rulebook is the new Link System, in which pilots can be assigned out-of-turn supporting fire actions when their partners are attacked. Engineering situations so an enemy provokes counter attacks from half your platoon – a wildly unfair display of mechanised bullying that few will limp away from unscathed – becomes *FM4*'s leading strategy, both on and off the field. Enemies can link up for equally devastating effect, but are easily lured out of formation, making it less of a tactical consideration than it might have been.

In truth, most of the tactical elements of *FM4* are less than they might have been, although this is as much from the stubbornly introverted design of the series rather than a new failing on the game's part. Your most potent weapon remains the invisible dice roll determining which, if any, of your pilot's skills will activate in combat (using lengthy linked attacks can increase the chances), and real strategic thinking is less useful than exploiting the singlemindedness of the enemy AI. That rings true of many SRPGs, but can leave a cheap aftertaste to an otherwise decisive victory – though that guilt is easily rationalised away when facing later foes exponentially more powerful and numerous than you.

For those unconcerned with being the only presence on the battlefield capable of lateral thinking, there's a lot of density here, if not depth. If the series is to continue, though, it's clear that the old school has a lot to learn.

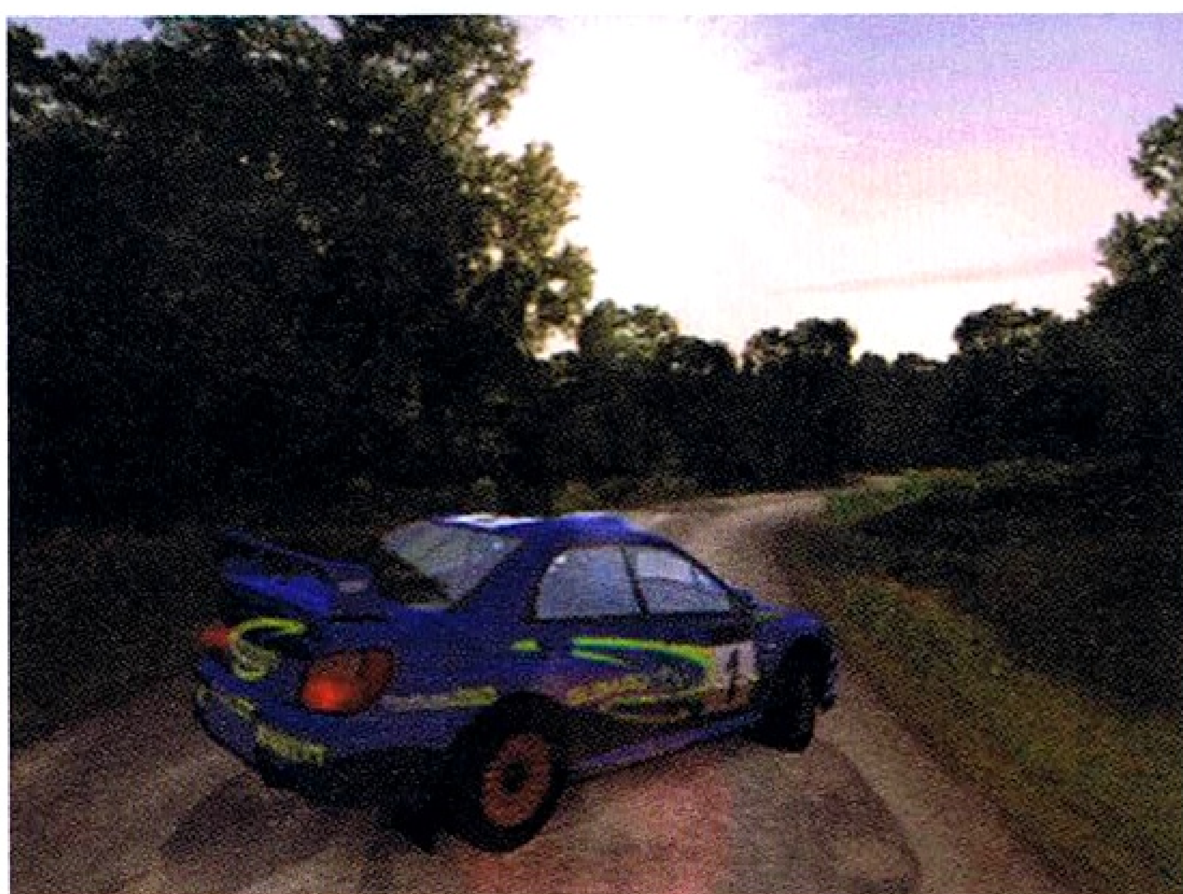
Edge rating: Six out of ten

Richard Burns Rally

Format: **PC, PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **SCi** Developer: **Warthog** Price: **$99.95 (PC $79.95)** Release: **Out now**

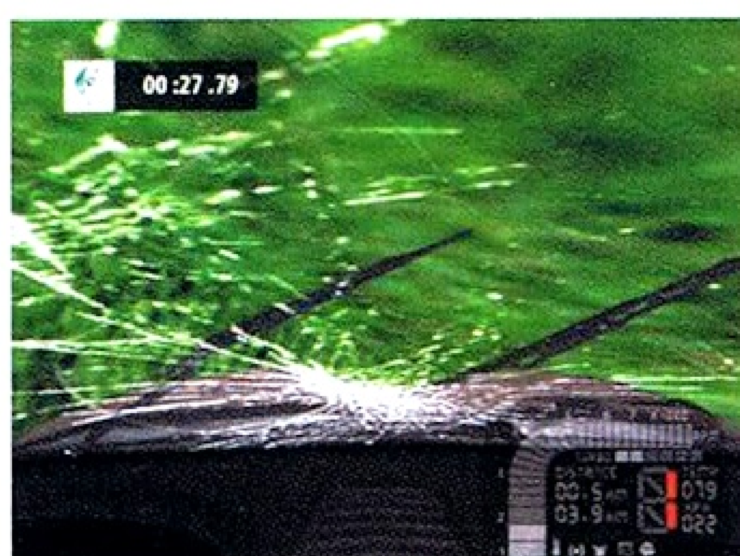








Just six countries feature, albeit with a healthy number of stages each, while licensing issues dictate that the car selection is a mix of recent WRC contenders





Much effort has clearly gone into recreating the topography of the road surface, with great success – you really get to feel every bump, trough and camber change, as well as every impact in a crash

Feel the Burns

While input from Richard Burns will have inevitably been affected by the 2001 WRC champion's health concerns, Warthog has nevertheless included Burns-specific modes. In Richard Burns Challenge you get to compete head to head against the times set by the man himself. In another neat touch, you get to be Burns' passenger in Rally School, which sets the benchmark for the standard of driving you should aim for.

You won't often find us having to use a force-feedback wheel in order to conquer a driving game. But rarer still is one we can't overcome. Yet, as this issue goes to press, we have yet to win a single stage in *Richard Burns Rally* (other than on 'easy', which obviously doesn't count). To state that Warthog's rally effort is difficult is a severe understatement. You can forget about throwing cars into corners with reckless abandon and powering out of the other end, bodywork unscathed (as is typical in many rally titles) – more often than not you'll be asking for spectator assistance in getting your car back on its wheels (and on the track).

RBR is hard because it's realistic. The level of simulation is on a par with past high-end examples on PC, and unlike anything ever to have reached a console. One look at the options – which let you play around with aspects such as tyre and brake pressures and, yes, even the strut platform height of the geometry – should leave you with little doubt of the game's intentions. Should you still need convincing, visit the Rally School, where you'll be taught real-world rally techniques such as left-foot braking and Scandinavian flicks. Once you enter a rally you'll have no choice but to put into practice what you've learned. Push too hard – easily done – and you'll get a chance to experience the dynamic scenery elements, as well as how quickly you can damage a world rally car beyond repair (depending on the damage setting, of course).

Faults are mainly in presentation. There is an issue with excessive loading (mostly in the essentially obligatory Rally School) but it's an overall lack of personality that ultimately grates. While Burns and co-driver Robert Reid feature at various points in the game, the opportunity to deliver an encompassing rally experience and capitalise on the association with a leading driver hasn't quite been fulfilled (in the way that Codemasters' *CMR3* similarly failed). There's a certain sterility to pre- and post-stage proceedings – not helped by Paul Oakenfold's audio contribution – and you often don't feel as engaged as you should.

That aside, it's a pleasure to be challenged this hard. *RBR* demands a level of concentration and a delicacy of control that the majority of gamers won't have encountered before, thus ensuring it occupies a genuine gap in a crowded market. A harsh but rewarding drive.

Edge rating: **Seven out of ten**

Sudeki

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Microsoft** Developer: **Climax** Price: **$69.95** Release: **Out now**



Sudeki's fire-lit, silhouetted stick-puppet intro is typical of the game's beauty, impressively recounting an otherwise hokey RPG story of mischievous gods and worlds torn in two







Sudeki is constantly, blissfully pretty. The cottages and lanes seem to be carved out of sweets; eye candy indeed

Sudeki is schizophrenic. It's almost as if there are two separate forces pulling on the game: one wants it to be a memorable, thoughtful, ambitious action RPG, the other wants it to be a bland, compromising walkover, accessible to the point of pointlessness. It's opposite forces like these that can create the precarious balancing act of a great videogame. In *Sudeki*'s case, these forces seem to have torn the game in two.

The lead characters are abysmally designed. Waxen, ugly and uninspired, with more than a whiff of committee behind them, they're the most dislikeable aspect of an otherwise magnificent world. Characters aside, *Sudeki* features a prodigious level of art direction and imagination. Witness benevolent god Testu, who appears at several key points, a living light show carved from gems. Or the tavern in the hi-tech city of Transentia, where the bar taps have been replaced with a complex arrangement of cogs and shafts. Even the glorious armour sported by the characters is a candied, textured treat. Unlike its lead character design, *Sudeki*'s look is one of abundant colour, solidity and majesty, much like *Skies Of Arcadia* or *Dark Chronicle*. The biggest compulsion behind playing the game is in seeing what grand scenes await around the next corner, to be lapped up and ogled via a switch to firstperson viewpoint.

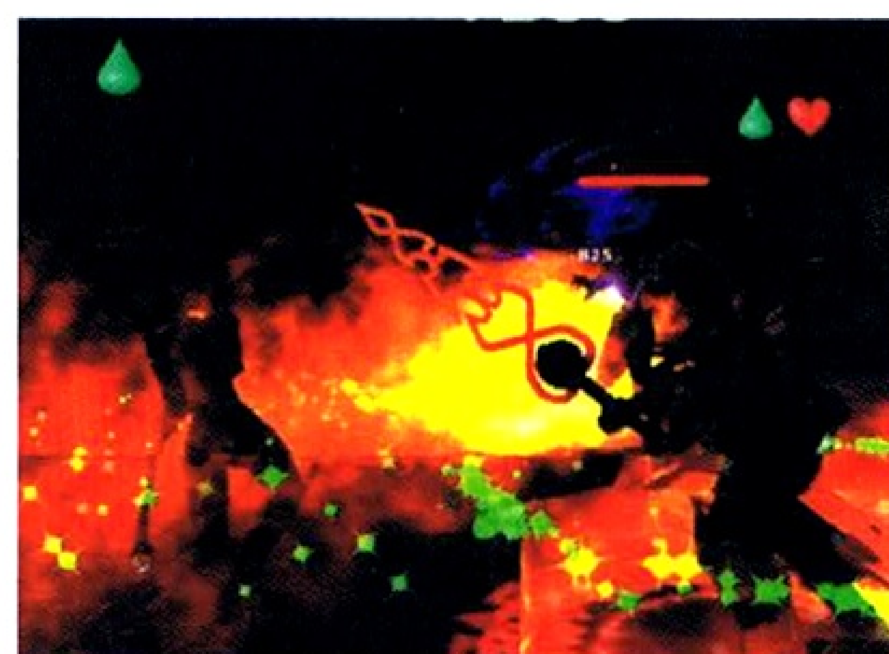
More schizophrenia: *Sudeki*'s range of voice-acted accents is more than just a melting pot; it's like some Eurovision Dialogue Contest where no stereotype is left unrepresented. Strong regional accents sat ill among Rare's more fantastic creature-led games, but here they're far more awkward and sometimes embarrassing. And while the script is bearable, pivotal plot events are handled clumsily. Otherwise, though, the ambience and plucked-guitar music lend the game an air that complements the substantial, captivating game world.

And more schizophrenia: *Sudeki*'s combat is ambitious, chaotic and multi-layered. Its puzzles are anything but. Fights aren't random, but they are unavoidable. Each location has a number of danger zones, and entering these areas will almost always result in a fight, sometimes even if you've just exited one by a few steps and decide to double back on yourself. Half of your team fight in thirdperson, using melee weapons and combos. This style of fighting feels slightly sticky and cumbersome, but still makes for a decent system. The other half of your team attacks via firstperson, firing magic and projectile weapons into the fray. This is the most engaging facet of *Sudeki*'s battles, bringing with it the flexibility and satisfaction of attack associated with firstperson combat. The chaos of the fighting is welcome, but it does highlight just how incapable your teammates are of looking after themselves. Until they become sufficiently powerful, it's best to set their AI to 'defend' while you

The biggest compulsion behind playing Sudeki is in seeing what grand scenes await around the next corner, to be lapped up and ogled

Previously in E117, E125, E136

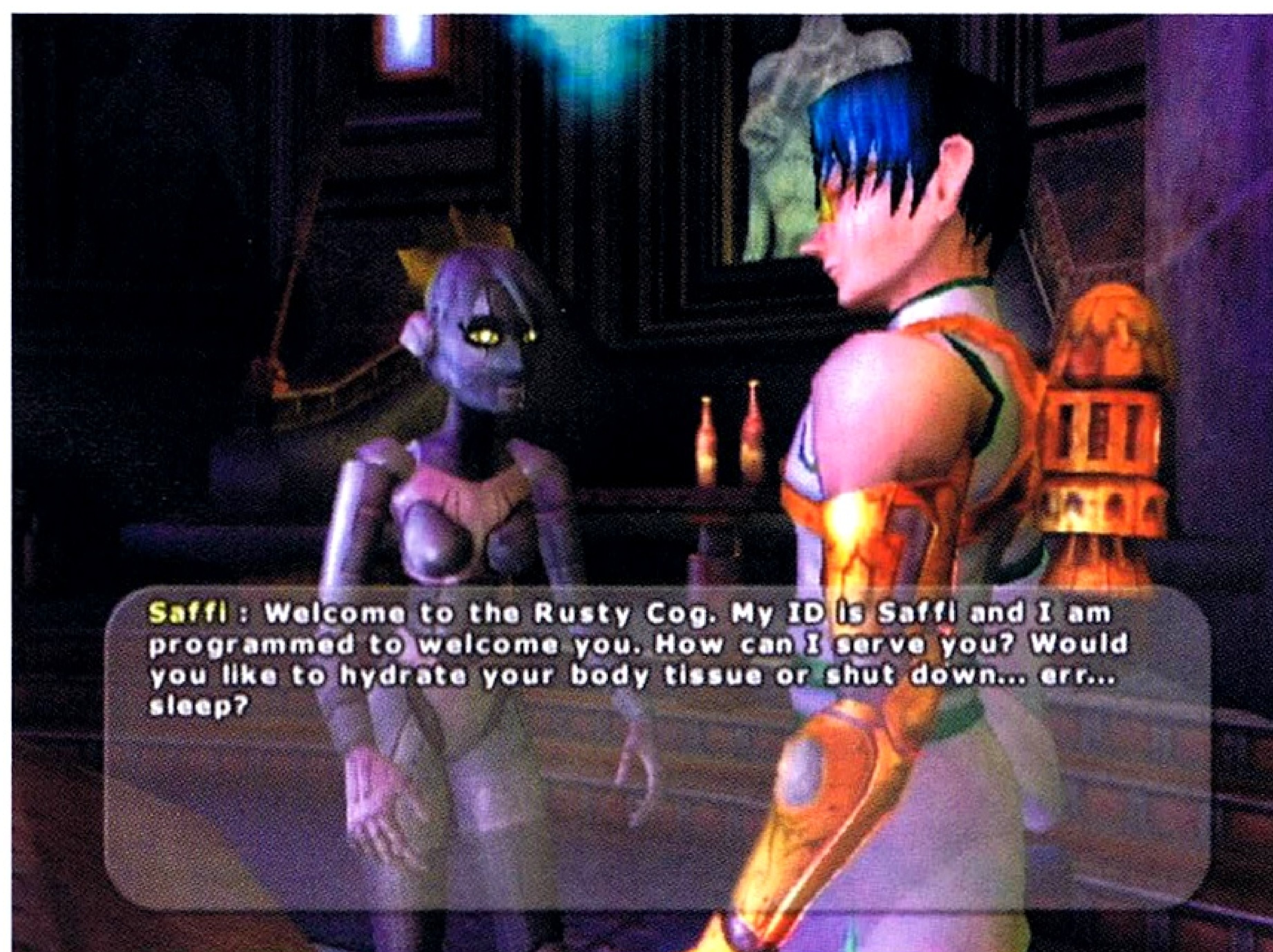














Defeat an enemy with a particularly powerful blow, and they'll explode into a shower of blood, but such gratuitous gore feels jarring



perform most of the offensive duties. Levelling up allows you to cultivate one of two approaches: bolstering your character's power and health, or increasing the efficacy and number of special attacks.

The puzzles and tasks that intersperse the combat, however, are thoughtless and menial. They're beyond pushovers – they're non-existent. Each character has an ability so generic it could almost be some kind of ironic punishment for their dull appearance: one can push crates, one can climb up obvious wall textures, one can glide across gaps, and one can dispel magically concealed objects to make them appear. The puzzles are so unintelligent that knowing these powers alone is enough to solve them. And some of the crate-nudging sections in the latter half of the game are very nearly an insult for a title that's so sophisticated in many other ways. Appreciable effort has also gone into the representing the light/dark world duality of *Sudeki*, but no use is made of it to proffer anything in terms of the kind of beautifully intricate befuddlement of *A Link To The Past*.

Less absent-minded game design and more faith in complexity to complement the boisterous and involving combat would have meant *Sudeki* wouldn't have been so barely above average. It's a game that's been lavished and loved in some areas, and inexplicably deprived in others. It's no surprise, then, that the end result has such a split personality.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Posse galore

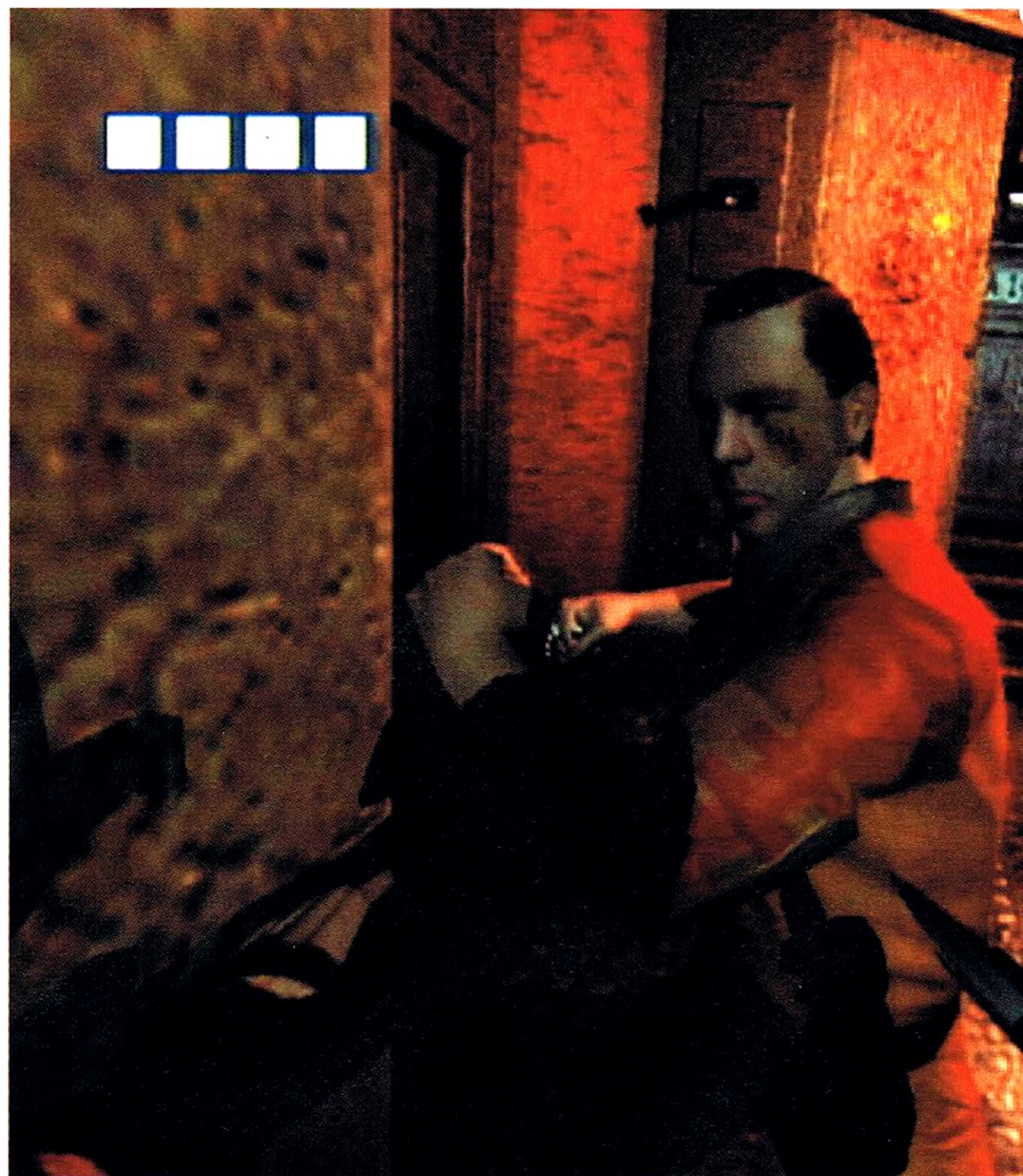
Switching between characters is a fluid and simple feat, a feature that comes into its own during the heat of combat. Boss battles, however, are fought one on one, with the plot choosing which member of your team goes up against a suitably climactic leviathan. This is a welcome idea, but one that's left typically unexplored as most boss fights seem to feature little else but repetition: identify weak spot, attack, hide from vicious counterattack and repeat until you've whittled yourself numb.

The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Vivendi Universal** Developer: **Starbreeze** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**



'Vin Diesel's likeness!' boasts the feature list on the back of the box. It's an oddly Victorian turn of phrase, but appropriate to the 19th-century sideshow gasps drawn by the absolutely uncanny model







Voice acting is excellent throughout, from Diesel's laconic, rumbling narration to a deliciously camp, clipped turn from The A Team's Dwight Schultz as the prison warden. Other cult names on the roster include Xzibit, Ron Perlman and Diesel's Pitch Black co-star Cole Hauser

As the opening credits roll on *The Chronicles of Riddick*, the eponymous antihero is walked into Butcher Bay – the vast, squalid prison-city that is the game's sole setting – over ominous orchestral swells and under the slowly fading names of an impressive cast list. The guard barks and swears his way through the house rules while inmates watch the new arrival pass with wary eyes, murmuring and growling to themselves. It's a textbook piece of scene setting, borrowing all the atmospheric firepower the game's licence can afford, and using every trick in the big book of cinematic technique. Well, not every trick. Not at all, in fact, because the camera is absent and the player is already behind Riddick's eyes, taking in the scene with sweeps of the right thumbstick, controlling the character even when the character has no control.

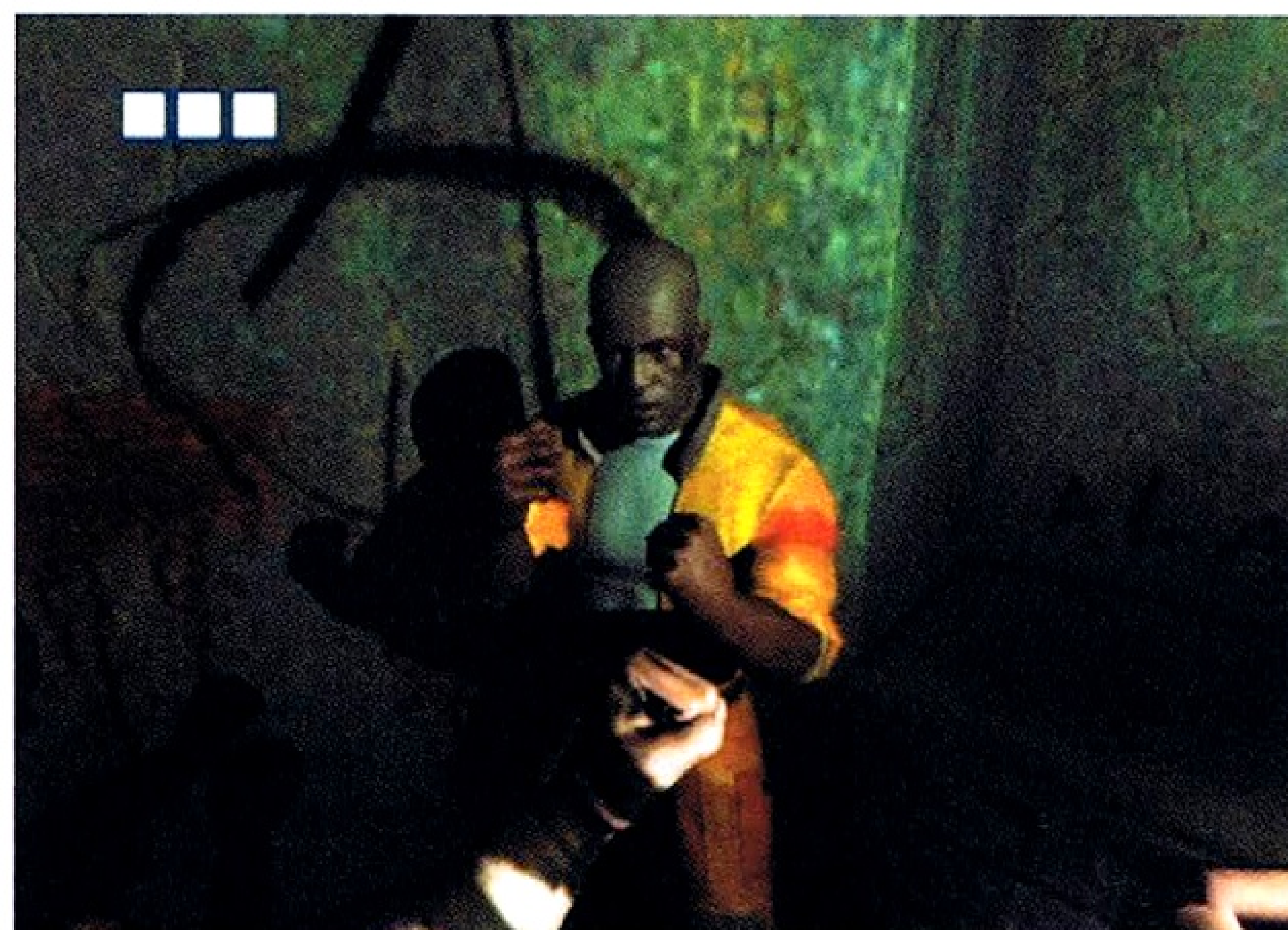
In itself, this may be no more than a lift from that unforgettable introduction to *Half-Life*. But it's an inspired lift, a sure-footed piece of tightrope walking and a clear statement of intent: *Riddick* suffers no film envy, nor is it going to squander its IP on window dressing for generic videogame action. It's its own beast, and it intends to fuse its celluloid inspiration and its native medium so closely you can't see the join.

The freedom to plunge areas into complete darkness to gain an advantage over your foes hands the initiative back to the player

Fittingly, then, the lead character's trademark from the films – his ability to see in the dark, gifted to him early on in this game – also provides *Riddick* with its own signature twist on stealth action. The freedom to plunge areas into complete darkness to gain an advantage over your foes hands the initiative back to the player in a genre where you can all too often feel beaten by circumstance. It makes this easily one of the most rewarding and empowering stealth games to date, helped by a transparent, uncluttered interface and some well-sorted controls (the clumsy and counter-intuitive weapon-select aside). If it has been under-exploited – and sadly, it has – it's only down to an admirable pursuit of variety. Admirable, but slightly misguided, because many of the game's other innovations and idiosyncrasies are not so sure of their mark. The firstperson fisticuffs are as woolly, one-dimensional and frantic as the firefights or the sneaking are measured and precise.

The central importance of light and shade neatly integrates the game's vastly impressive graphics with the action at its heart. Those astonishingly realistic lighting effects are a huge asset in terms of information and atmosphere, as they carve the meticulously rendered, almost tactile grit and granite into inviting pools of shadow, exposed















The guards are just smart enough to be credible, but still stupid enough to be fun. But it's a shame we're expected to believe that a man in a one-ton suit of riot armour isn't capable of following his prey through a door

wastelands of light and the shifting spots of the guards' torches. *Riddick* never fails to impress and immerse, technically standing head and shoulders above the console competition. But the price paid in loading times is high, and it must be said that the art direction lacks imagination in places.

Where *Riddick* is both bravest and weakest, perhaps, is in its touching determination to recreate prison life (or prison life as it appears on film). This leads to long tracts of talking, trading, pledging favours, to-ing and fro-ing between NPCs; gradually amassing information and social climbing, slammer-style. You can be shot dead by the guards for so much as raising your fists or having a weapon equipped at these times, and action comes only in the form of occasional, sanctioned bouts. It does wonders for the suspension of disbelief, and gives the expansive, lovingly scripted cast (heavy with clunk-clink cliché as they are) room to breathe. What it *isn't* is any fun. Ultimately, you feel you're just doing time at the whim of the designers, and the RPG-lite elements of inventory and task management sit ill in such a streamlined and focused title.

This is just the most serious example of *Riddick*'s most endemic flaw: poor pacing. The game's middle third makes up more than half of it (if you'll forgive our arithmetic), and is the most boring and frustrating by far, eking out challenges through restrictions on both weapons and the opportunity for Riddick to do what he does best – make places to hide and kill in. It's here that the environments seem most monotonous too, and the game's talent for dramatic set-pieces deserts it.

All is forgiven, however, as *Riddick*'s closing act is short, but oh so toothsomely sweet. In quick succession come a drastic shift in visual tone, a startling and inventive conundrum and a hilarious, bombastic climax that allows Riddick to take revenge on his captors (and the player to take revenge on the frustrations of stealth games) in high style. It's not just a sense of humour and flair for mayhem that *Riddick* shares with its star; it's a compact, muscular and singleminded piece of work, too. Flawed, yes, but so confident and independent that it's hard not to like.



Edge rating: Seven out of ten



Me and my shadow

Immersing players in the game world is seldom a problem from a firstperson perspective, but giving them a physical presence there, and an identification with a recognisable character, is much harder to achieve. Starbreeze has chosen to have Riddick cast a sharp, exquisitely animated and unmistakable shadow. Catching sight of the hero's coiled form creeping along the wall ahead of you, and towards his next victim, is a dark and vicarious thrill.

Spider-Man 2

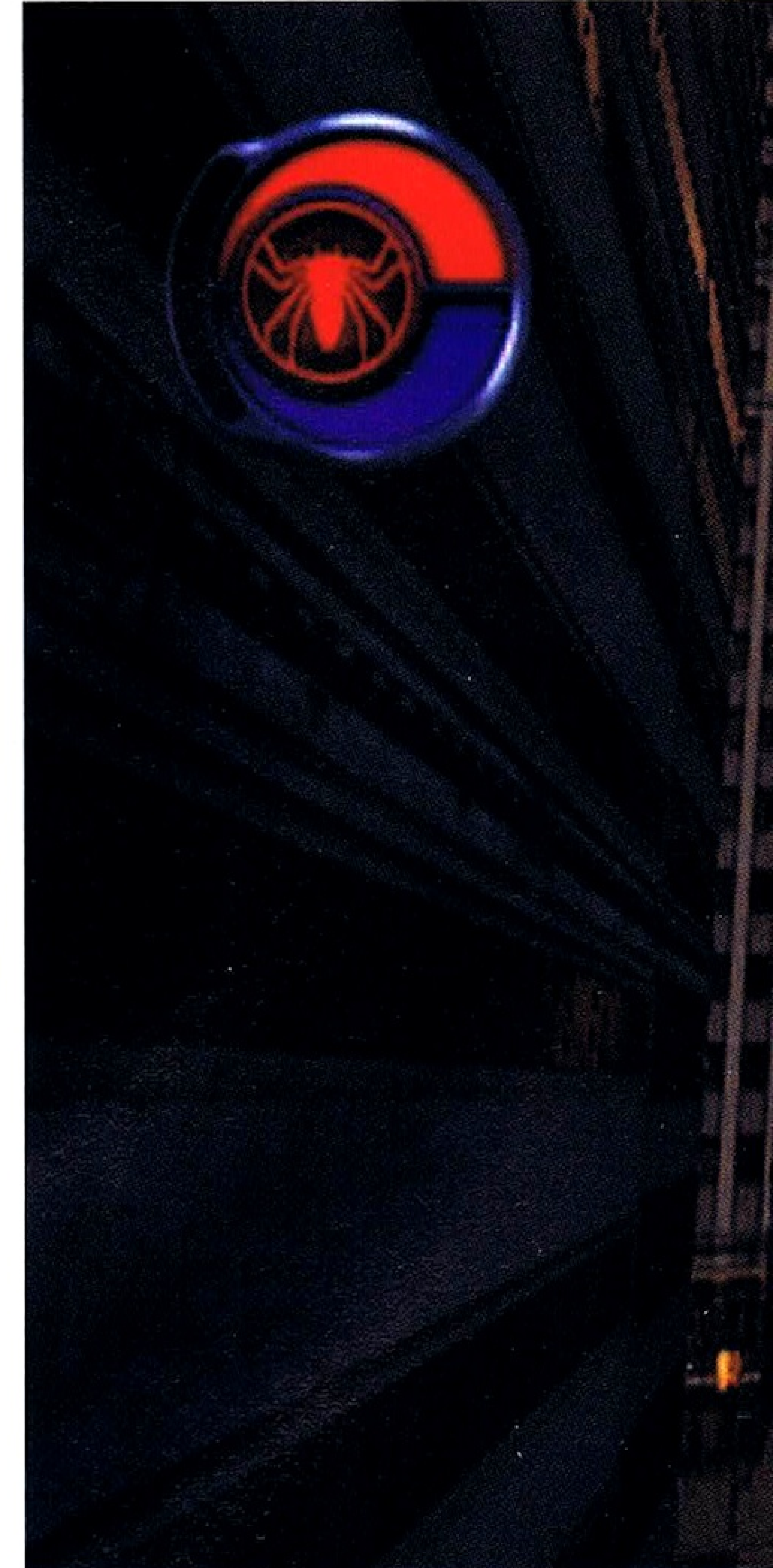
Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Treyarch** Price: **$99.95** Release: **Out now**





Spider-Man can purchase extra moves with his hero points, and there's fun to be had from trying out all the combos and air-juggles





This is the game of the film and broadly mimics the story played out by Maguire, Dunst, Molina and co. However, though the movie may be an improvement over its predecessor, the game interpretation is undermined by too many dull moments.

Unlike the previous games in the series, this *Spider-Man* has been given the key to Manhattan. 'A massive free-roaming, do-anything, virtual city' promises the press release, failing to mention that it's as regimented as a Stalinist boot-camp. Building a working universe is one thing; making it appear to teem with life and possibility is quite another. It's not as intricate or appealing as, say, *Vice City* and there's little use in exploring every alleyway and rooftop because, apart from the rare secret token, there's nothing to discover.

At least Spider-Man's greatest asset, the ability to soar between buildings by web-slinging, has been captured with grace and felicity. This is by far the game's strongest feature and once you buy a few ability upgrades (from shops dotted around the city) you will be propelling yourself between skyscrapers with speed and majesty. The web attaches itself to the nearest building, causing Spider-Man to move forwards and sideways. Momentum can be maintained by letting go of the web, turning in another direction and firing again. Technique improves with practice, but the sensation of flying through the air and defying gravity has been executed brilliantly.

The representation of New York is hardly breathtaking – visually and architecturally *Spider-Man 2* is robust rather than resplendent – but climbing and swinging from all the famous landmarks is an attraction in itself, and the draw distance is powerful enough to give you great views once you've scaled the top of the Empire State Building. The map works well, highlighting the mission-specific goals, hint markers and shops, and navigation around the city is stress free, bar the occasional time limit on a task.

However, it's the mission tasks that give *Spider-Man 2* an almighty slug in the face. Each chapter asks you to complete two or three goals, one of which is to collect a number of hero points. Disastrously, the bulk of these points are mustered by walking up to distressed citizens (highlighted by luminous icons above their heads) and pressing 'X'. After completing a mere handful of these missions you'll find that they begin to repeat. Save a man dangling from a roof, foil an armed robbery, escort an injured citizen to hospital – again, again, again. The result is that *Spider-Man 2* contains more padding than Tobey Maguire's costume. Is American developer Treyarch simply short of level designers? It's more likely that a tight deadline forced its ambition to be reigned in.

These missions are even presented

Spider-Man's greatest asset, the ability to soar between buildings by web-slinging, has been captured with grace and felicity





It's a technically accomplished, if not stunningly beautiful, representation of Manhattan, but the main fault with *Spider-Man 2* is its insistence on making you repeatedly face boring street crime









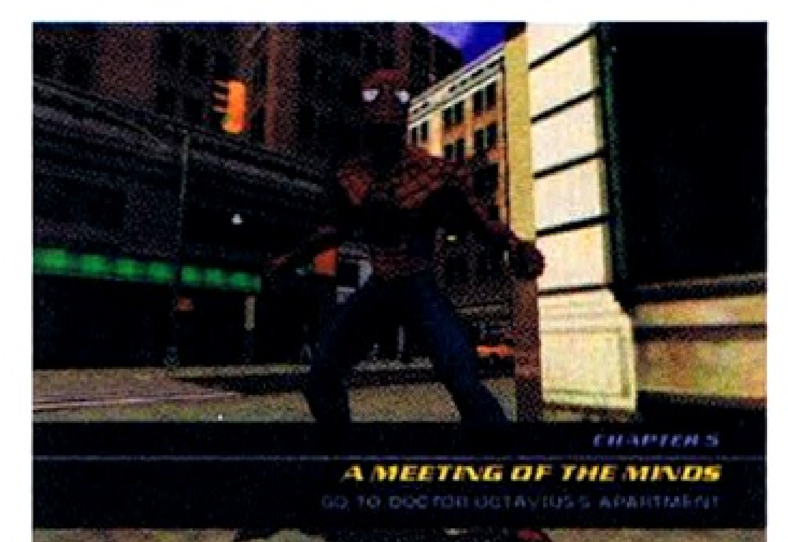
Climb high enough and you will be treated to some magnificent views of Manhattan (top)

clumsily. The hustle and bustle of the city is interspersed with random comments from citizens as you swing by – "Get a real job," one of them shouts – but should you decide to take on a mission at that moment the audio clip is awkwardly interrupted. It's a small point, but indicative of the game's lack of final polish.

After so much secrecy on the part of the game's publisher it would be ill-mannered to reveal plot details. Suffice it to say the story-driven missions are only marginally better than the ones you take on at your discretion. Some are boss fights, some involve arena combat, others see you chasing another well-known superhero across the rooftops. The variety makes a welcome change and the combat is multi-layered – there are plenty of ability upgrades to collect that can increase the complexity with which you can batter, fling and twirl roughnecks around on a bit of web. Snatching weapons out of hoodlums' hands then air-juggling them with your fists can be great fun.

Spider-Man 2 presents players with a city ripe for action and exploration, but once you swing down out of the clouds and take a closer look at the grubby streets and roads strewn with vehicles, you'll find little to pique your interest. Swinging through the city is delightful and makes you feel superheroic – which is exactly what's expected – but the unimaginative missions soon take the shine off what could have been an excellent adventure. This a game that bravely keeps its pants on the outside but never ends up looking cool.

Edge rating: Six out of ten



Time flies

Along with Bruce Campbell, Kirsten Dunst and Alfred Molina, Tobey Maguire supplies his voice. Delivered with his trademark dopey drawl, it adds immeasurably to the atmosphere. Just like the comic book hero, Spidey is constantly turning up late for appointments, but while this works as a dramatic device in the movie it becomes irksome in the game, especially when you reach your goal within the allotted time.

Gradius V

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **Treasure** Price: **$99.95** Release: **October**





Gradius V is more omnidirectional than previous iterations of the saga. It forces you to make on-the-fly changes to your weapon set-up depending on the challenge







Treasure has plundered and upgraded ideas from most of the other games in the series, but it's *Salamander* that gets the biggest nod. Newcomers to the series won't feel drowned in nostalgia, however, as the result is entirely fresh

Neglected beast, the horizontal shooter. Outside of *Border Down* and *R-Type Final*, left-to-right shmups have gradually been shuffled out to pasture, making way for glossy upstarts like *Ikaruga* and *Psyvariar 2*.

Gradius V arrives like a blast of hot boss explosion, lobbing a cheeky depth-charge up the rear of an increasingly stale genre. For a start, Mr Vic Viper now has a few new outfits. Stick to a classic power-up spread (speed, missile, double, laser, option, shield) if you like, but, unlike previous *Gradius* games, you

Gradius V arrives like a blast of hot boss explosion, lobbing a cheeky depth-charge up the rear of an increasingly stale genre



Multi-segmented bosses are a new addition. Take too long to suss out the patterns, and they get even angrier

won't be able to languish in the multiple-laser comfort zone forever. Depending on the environment, there's plenty of on-the-fly mixing and matching – with even the much-neglected double playing a part.

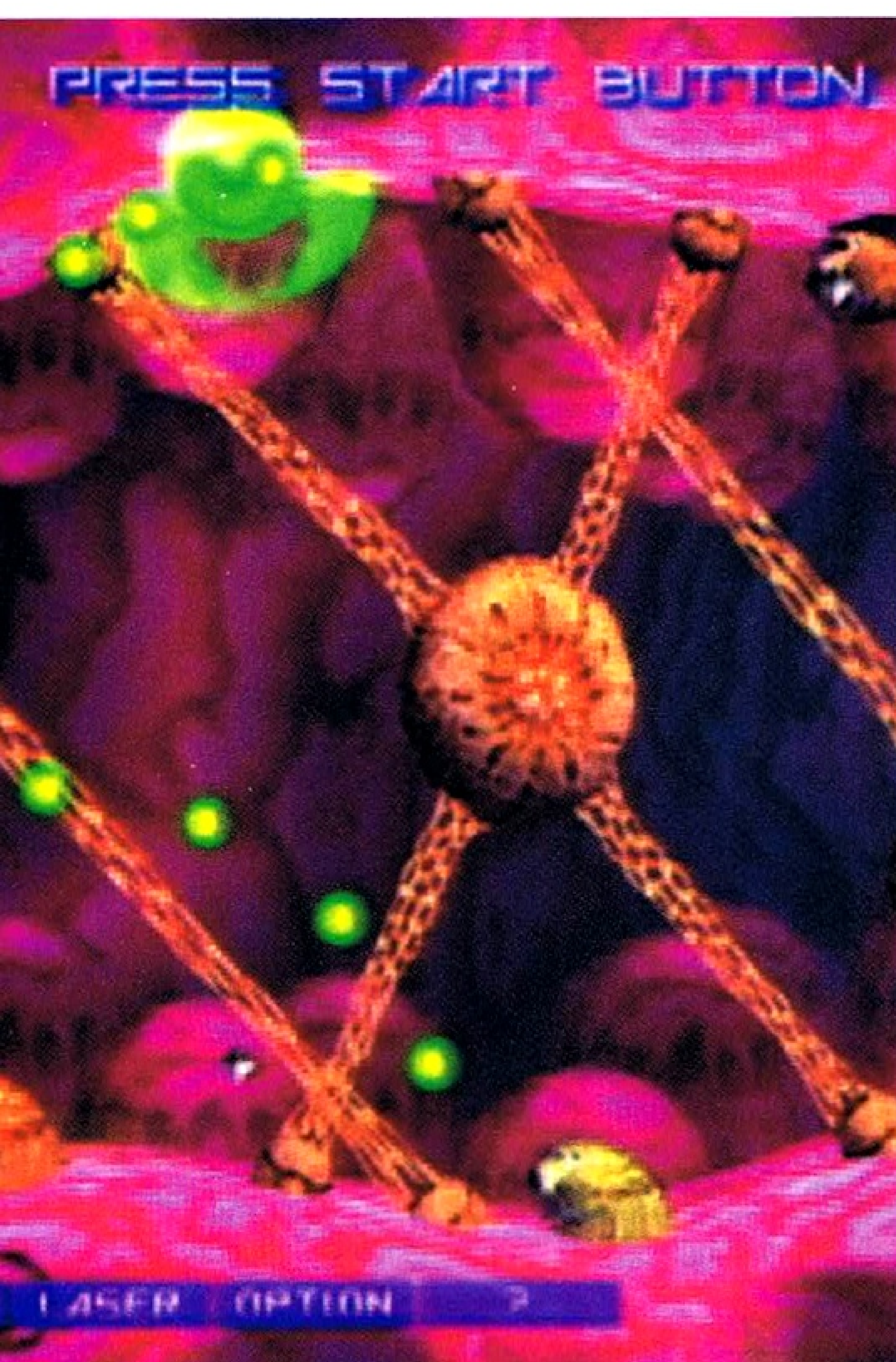
The biggest joy of *Gradius V* is that it's equally regressive and progressive. It's utterly and completely *now*, but also respectful of its elders in look and, most importantly, feel. Rather than over-produce some flashy remake, Treasure has ladled on cosmetics without losing sight of what made the game so great in the first place: the muscle memory of hammering those first few waves of option-spawning bad guys; smugly taking on motherships while squeezing through the middle of their laser bursts; running a tense line between score-maximising and survival.

The big issue here – and the series' perennial flaw – is the way the Vic sheds all those hard-earned power-ups on death. Treasure's solution is pretty workable. If you activate Revival Start, you'll be bumped back to the beginning of the section, classic style. Otherwise, the options are scattered in a friendly cluster, with only speed, missile and lasers being lost – as in *Salamander*. Not perfect, but much more lenient punishment than leaving you naked and sluggish with only the default pea-shooter for protection.

What's so refreshing is the way the game effortlessly revels in itself. It's forever tweaking and subverting the format by fiddling with gravity and physics. The action creeps up slowly, starting out like a gorgeous-looking but fairly standard shoot 'em up. However, by the middle of level two, it's pummelling you with a relentless parade of conceptual set-pieces so audacious and inventive you'll laugh with delight as you gape in horror.

There's a crowd-pleasing, old-school 2D *Salamander* homage level, a section where you're chased by a glooping cascade of toxic goo which perfectly obeys the lurching and listing surroundings, a blizzard of asteroids that takes point-whoring to a new level of hysteria, and an area with organic terrain that swells and undulates, leaving only the tiniest of gaps for the ship to squeeze through.

And then… the *bosses*. A gigantic spider mech – inspired by the *Parodius* can-can girl – whose laser forces you to hide behind sections of scenery which topple treacherously when zapped. There's the multi-geometric hell of being trapped inside a spinning cage, lined with angry missile batteries, while a big pinball robot clatters off the walls. There's even a wonderfully cheeky boss-rush of original *Gradius* motherships – no way through but to destroy everything. It's











Twoplayer is supremely satisfying, with players scooping up each other's options whenever someone dies – which may be often





as if Treasure is telling us those old-school bosses were all well and good, but compared to the stuff that can be done now, they're practically standard enemies. Boss defeats are rewarded with the customary apocalyptic, slo-mo money-shot detonations – and it's not all girders or metal. The way the icky level four boss quivers and squelches before rupturing in an almighty hail of flatulence is a sight – and sound – to behold.

The obligatory stage-select system rewards the player with rehearsable areas based on how far they get in standard mode. You'll need them. This is a game shamelessly tailored to hardcore shmuppers, with moments of mind-bending bullet-hell intensity only comparable to the likes of *DoDonPachi* or *Ikaruga* at its most obnoxious. Thankfully, there's a good span of difficulty levels, with the only differences being the number of bullets flying around. Very Easy is a perfectly good way of easing yourself in before clambering all the way up to Normal. Very Hard is, naturally, hilarious.

Still, overall, the difficulty *is* high. But, as with any good shooter, it's all about playing it gung-ho: spotting the pixel-perfect gaps to slip through, jinking around the weeniest let-ups in the bullet flurry, having the guile to spy and settle into a sweet spot, and the gall to take the fight to the game.

Coop twoplayer is a well-balanced blast, and it's more of a collaborative effort than the usual greed-is-good style. Unlike *Ikaruga*, it doesn't feel tacked on or counter-productive.

Disappointments are mostly nit-picky and subjective. With this much out-and-out fun to be had, only the most churlish will note that the story and cut-scenes are hardly gripping. The enemy bullets could be a little more clearly defined, and, no, the Easter Island statues aren't in there.

Treasure has clearly set out to pay tribute to a classic series, while giving the whole shmup concept a bit of a makeover in the process. Job well and truly done.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten

Vic 'n' mix

There are four default configs and a custom mode so you can mash together a ship more to your taste. Missile tweaks include Eagle Wind – where two torpedoes spread off in opposite directions. There's now a double tailgun, *Salamander*'s ripple laser, and a fancy-looking but deeply useless flamethrower. There's also the option to use the classic front shield, an all-round force field or a Mega Crash (instant smart bomb).

The most radical change is in option control. Now, you can stick to standard *Gradius*, lock the options in a single position, have them rotate, or go for the tricky but devastating directional control where the right stick is used to aim.

YOU CAN NEVER TELL WHO PLAYS GAMES THESE DAYS.

That last corner was just like Colin McRae 4!

Yes, but I think the traction is more realistic in Richard Burns Rally.



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AVAILABLE MONTHLY WITH A *PLAYABLE* DEMO DISC.



Pokemon: Fire Red, Leaf Green

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **Game Freaks** Price: **$69.95** Release: **Out Now**





That's Japanese for, "You are about to lose your life to a game you'd be emabarrased to show your adult friends."









No Strings Attached

Fire Red and Leaf Green each come with a wireless network adapter, gratis. You can network and chat with up to 39 other players at once, but don't think this is some major new force in communications – the range is only 10 feet.



Colourful, yes, but there's no sign of Nintendo wasting time and effort on prettying the series up that much. Why would they? They're top-sellers the way they are.

Cock-fighting and role-playing – a decade ago, who would have imagined they could go so well together? Yet here we are, with Nintendo's Pocket Monsters a perennial favourite of children young and old, with *Pokemon* profits propping up the troubled gaming giant.

The setting is simple: you're a wandering *Pokemon* trainer, challenging rivals and hunting wild *Pokemon* along the way. The objective is simpler: to collect every one of the freaky little things you can get your hands on. Explore, travel, talk, fight, and deal with the deviants of Team Rocket whenever they appear.

Fire Red and Leaf Green are basically the same game, following the now-standard business model of inspiring gamers to covet thy neighbour's Pokemon. Almost, but not quite all of the creatures are available on each cartridge; the remainder must be traded.

This pesky human interaction arises from oft-crippling addiction, as the apparent simplicity of the game leads to all manner of emergent complexities. Turn-based strategy resolves battles, with chosen Pokemon fighting alone or in pairs. Tactics depend on which abilities are chosen, and strategy consists of choosing the right animals to battle in the first place. Each belongs to an element, with a rock/paper/scissors paradigm determining performance.

None of this is particularly new, and neither is the setting. Revisiting the territory and the quest previously covered in *Pokemon Red* and *Blue*, these new editions feature more options, secrets, characters and of course critters to capture. A streamlined interface and all these new odds and ends are enough to make these old stomping grounds fresh.

There are some genuinely innovative features here, probably enough to please even the most fervent GBA fan. One prime example is the way game loads are handled. Upon resuming a game, you're treated to a little black and white movie re-capping where your character is and what he did the last time you played. With so much terrain to cover, a godsend for getting back up to speed.

Other features tend towards the bizarre - The secret in-game code system to learn is Braille. Actually, that might not be so useless after all. Games as compelling as *Pokemon* can be inspiring enough to ruin one's eyesight.

Or, as Team Rocket are off to put it, surrender now, or prepare to fight (Meow! That's Right!)



Edge rating: Eight out of ten



The making of…

Syndicate

A world run by heavily armed cyborgs working for multinational corporations may be a dream in boardrooms the world over, but only one game gave MDs the chance to live out the fantasy

"I used to get friends, around five of them, to come in at the weekends. Instead of going to the pub…"

Sean Cooper's train of thought momentarily stalls, and he pauses. It's over ten years since he led the *Syndicate* project; more than a decade since Bullfrog's dystopian opus beguiled gamers and critics with its combination of progressive, squad-based shoot 'em up, strategic planning and – for the time – refreshingly freeform environs. "What I wanted to do with my life at that point was work – I didn't want to go to the pub or chat up girls," Cooper continues, with disarming candour. "We'd come in and play it multiplayer. We'd all go round trying to kill each other, and I'd hear someone say: 'Ah… that's shit', and then I'd try to fix the problem. It was just a great atmosphere in which to create a game. We had no one telling us what to do. We did what we wanted to."

The most adroit explanation of Bullfrog's success in the early '90s is that its staff genuinely enjoyed themselves, making games that, first



Original format: **PC**
Publisher: **Electronic Arts**
Developer: **Bullfrog**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1993**



According to Trowers, each territory was once planned to feature three individual missions: the standard first run as your syndicate expands, a second in the event of a revolt, and a third should your syndicate ever lose control

and foremost, *they* wanted to play. You can discuss Peter Molyneux's qualities as a game designer, **Glenn Corpes**' coding prowess, Les Edgar's business nous, or highlight the quality of the post-*Populous* appointments to a growing company – individuals like **Alex Trowers** (now of Kuju), Cooper (now at EA's Warrington studio) and **Paul McLaughlin** (now with Molyneux at Lionhead), among others. But if you really want to understand why *Syndicate* worked so well, had so many innovative features, and is invariably namechecked in Best Games Ever! lists, know this: Bullfrog was very much its own best customer.

Level three lunch

Syndicate, once called *Cyber Assault*, first took shape during a liquid lunch. "It really just evolved," reveals Corpes, the former Bullfrog uber-coder who is now plying his trade at Climax. "I have very vague memories of a lunchtime design meeting in the pub, talk of multiple characters. I think it was an overhang from an older game. *Flood* – a 2D platformer for the ST and Amiga – originally had four players with their own cameras, and you could switch any camera to the main screen. It didn't work at all, and *Flood* evolved into a completely different game, a cutesy platformer. But a few people were kind of attached to the four character thing…"

Actually, Cooper tells us, *Syndicate* once had eight on-screen charges for players to control. With all but himself and Trowers apparently finding this large number of heavily armed cyborg agents unwieldy, the decision to reduce the number of agents was to prove pivotal. "The eight players versus the four… that was a big transition," Cooper admits. "It didn't feel that good with eight, but we reduced it to four and, all of a sudden, it really worked. And you could set them up differently – you didn't really have time to do that with eight."

Rise of a new force

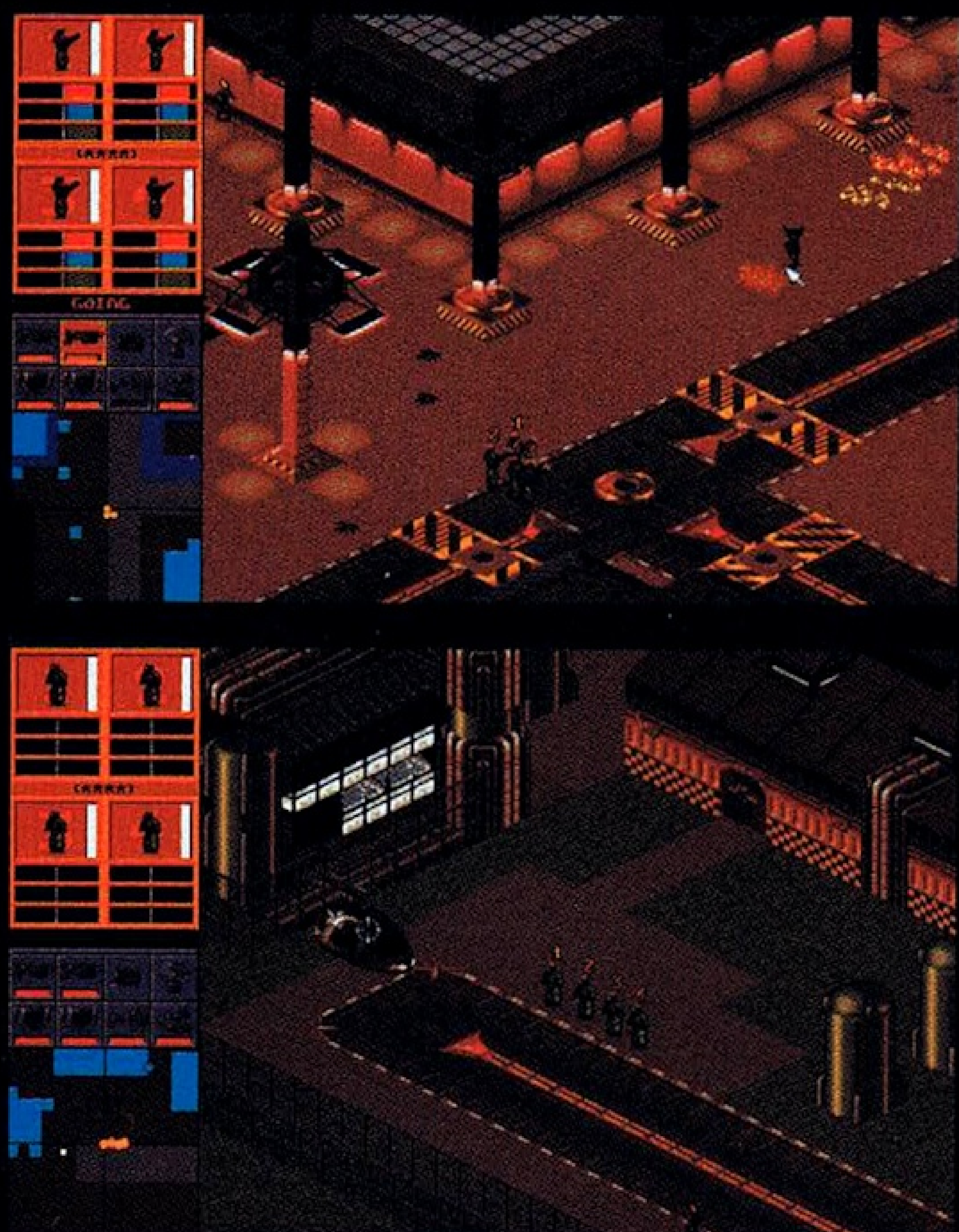
Syndicate was Bullfrog's first game to lead on PC, an announcement that led to cries of anguish from Amiga users (later mollified by Mike Diskette's excellent port). "I think the decision to switch was based purely on the fact that the PC allowed us to do all of the cool city stuff that we wanted to," explains Trowers. "The Amiga, bless its cottons, just wasn't powerful enough. Early versions of the fully isometric 3D, full-screen engine never used to get above 12fps with any more than a handful of guys running around. Even on the PCs in those days, we had to do some pretty nifty graphics stuff to get the whole thing to work at a reasonable speed. I think all of it made us think that the Amiga had pretty much run its course and that the PC would take over as the main platform. And we were intrigued by all this wonderful network stuff. The Bullfrog philosophy on making games was to try the whole thing out multiplayer and then make an AI to emulate the human players.

"Suddenly we weren't restricted to just two players. I think we all got very excited about this potential."

Just as *Populous* evolved through multiplayer matches between Molyneux and Corpes, networked games of *Syndicate* were a staple component of lunchtimes and late nights at the Bullfrog office. "We were playing it before a line of AI code had been written," says Corpes. "The gameplay evolved by playing it multiplayer over the network. This is the best way of designing games and should be done more often, rather than hacking multiplayer in as an afterthought."

"We'd get a few of our mates over after work and just play the thing multiplayer," recalls Trowers. "By doing that, we worked out what was fun and how the AI should operate and just built on that. It was a very iterative process and the most fun I've had in this industry – we'd play the game, make changes, whack out a new version and try the extra stuff." Inspired by these network sessions, Trowers began to build *Syndicate*'s singleplayer missions. "Once the maps were all built, it was a simple case of populating them and messing around with the layout of bad guys until it felt 'right'," he explains. "There was no overall plot or story that had to drive the levels – each was a disparate, modular experience. I was completely free to design each mission as I felt at that time. Rather

"We'd get a few of our mates over after work and just play the thing multiplayer. It was a very iterative process and the most fun I've had in this industry"



The cars in *Syndicate*, 'locked' to roads as if on rails, seemed something of a missed opportunity – but this was a design decision, not a shortcoming of Bullfrog's engine or coding



Cooper laments not having the opportunity to include more destruction and mayhem in *Syndicate*. Imagine…



Taking a leaf from the Nintendo design bible, *Syndicate* always promised another upgrade or toy. Customising and equipping agents was a clever feature and one that, by and large, worked

than the majority of missions in today's games, where there is a linear, set path to completion, a *Syndicate* mission was more of an environment where the player was free to attempt it in any way he liked. Once you have the basic rules of the world established, these are very easy to create… but they can be an absolute nightmare to balance."

Life of the city

With an ambitious and evolving brief – particularly its 'living' cities, populated by enemy agents, police, pedestrians and vehicles – Cooper toiled night and day to create a solid engine. "It was riddled with complexities – getting the city to display, moving people behind other stuff," he recalls. "It was kind of driven by one function called 'coversprite', I remember. Basically, the guys were drawn, then you drew over the top again to cover them. Sorting that out went on for about a year."

"I sort of inspired the isometric engine," says Corpes. "I'd been working on an optimised scrolling isometric engine some time before it started that worked by only updating the parts of the screen that had changed – as opposed to *Populous* that just redrew the whole scene – but it went nowhere. Sean basically rewrote this a year or so later when we moved to the PC."

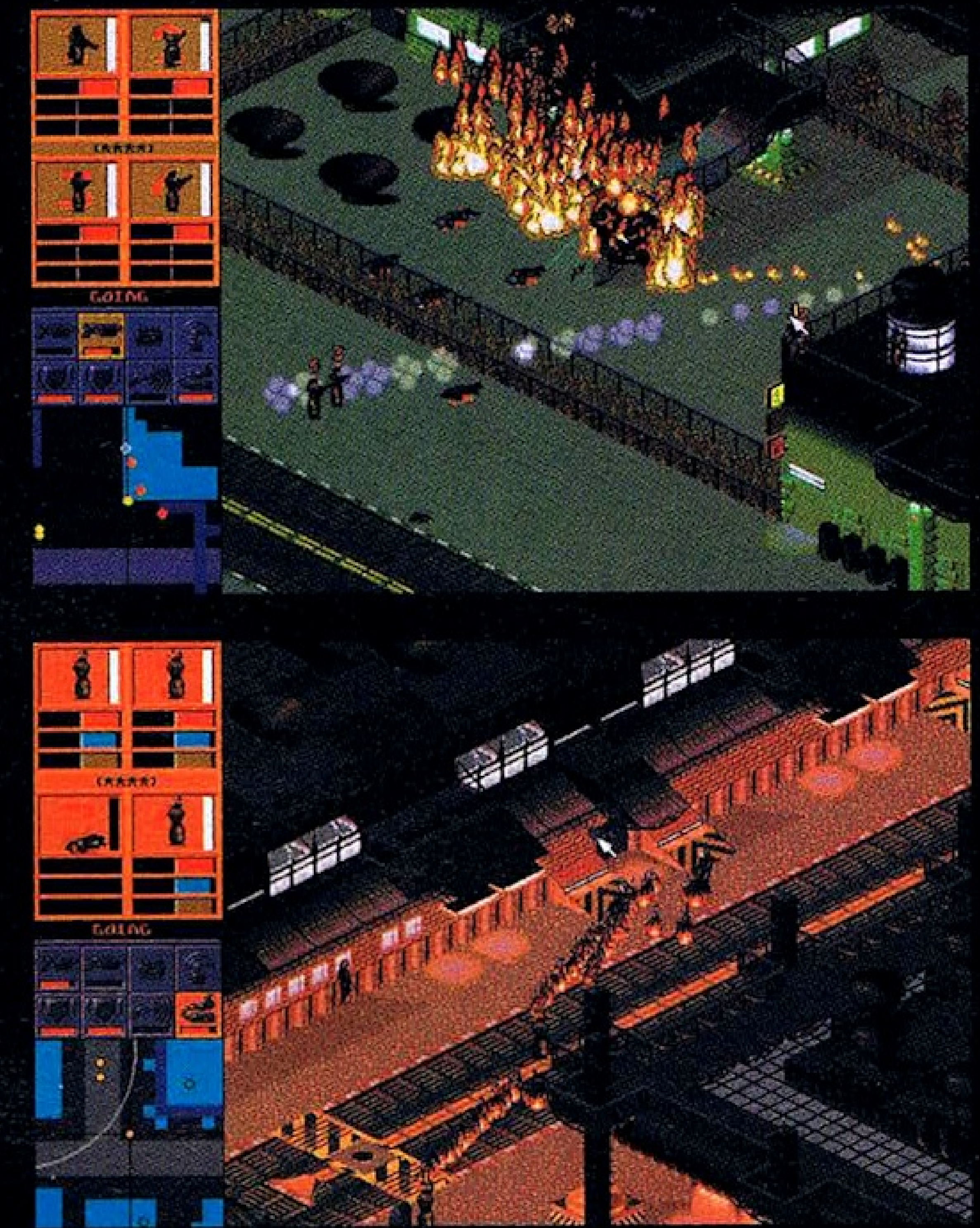
"Glenn was the expert programmer, and I was… well, I'm *still* rubbish at it," laughs Cooper. "For me, it was just about keeping things simple. But he knew a lot about technical stuff. I'd call him up at, like, four in the morning, and I'd say: 'Glenn, I've got a problem. You've *got* to come in sort it out, because I've got to put it on to these disks and send it off'. And he'd be like" – Cooper makes an exasperated, theatrical sigh – "'Oh… *bloody hell!* Right, I'm coming in'. And he'd come in and just sort it out."

Corpes, originally hired as an artist, is arguably the great unsung hero of Bullfrog's meteoric rise to the videogame development A-list. "Glenn was instrumental in that way," enthuses Cooper. "He could see the engine; he could see the technology. He couldn't necessarily see the game, but he could see the technology – raising or lowering the land in *Populous*, ways in which we could have really tall buildings in *Syndicate* and have people going behind stuff. And then there was *Magic Carpet*. If you take him out of the equation, I don't think Bullfrog would have been anything, if you see what I mean. He was an inspiration. He'd come up with a technical idea, and we'd be, like: 'Fuck me, that would be *awesome!* We could do this, and this, and this…'"

Drawing obvious inspiration from a certain Ridley Scott opus, *Syndicate*'s hi-res cityscapes were highly striking. "Paul McLaughlin and Chris Hill drove the visualisation side, and I was a right pain for them to work with," admits Cooper. "We had to build these sprites, and they were all cut into little pieces: heads, bodies, legs."

"Sean was always a pain in the arse," says McLaughlin. "He's mellowed a bit in recent years, I gather, but in the old days he wasn't much of a 'people person'. If he wanted something he'd 'tell' you rather than ask, and if he thought it was shit – which he always did – he'd tell you that, too. He got quite frustrated with his requirements being lost in the programmer-artist translator. Often he'd end up red in the face with Chris and myself just staring at him with smiles on our faces. It was cool, though: we were all learning together, really, and everyone on the team did have a sense of humour."

"The sprites were a nightmare, though," McLaughlin explains. "They had separate heads, torsos and legs so we could assemble a variety of characters. Creating something that looked like a person on that scale, let alone the cool superdetailed images



Although the flamethrower effect itself – a chain of simple sprites – was far from impressive, the screams of victims were memorably loud and unpleasant, making it a favourite of more pitiless players



All four agents have their chemical enhancements set to maximum. Increasing their aggression levels caused them to fire on their own initiative, which was initially jarring, but when you got to grips with the squad system it suddenly made sense



The first time you attacked one of *Syndicate*'s trains, you expected it to emerge unscathed and move on: solid, immutable, as all videogame furniture tended to be at the time. Watching it explode was one of the greatest pleasures of the 16bit era

in our heads, was such a struggle. We made a deliberate decision to sacrifice colours for dots. This was one of the first 'engines' that used such high resolution and we were really excited. Not seeing pixels and noticing aliasing was such a revelation – we felt the future of computer graphics was upon us."

"It ran in 640x480 while everyone else was writing in 320x200," Corpes contributes. "Everyone thought it was SVGA because of the resolution, but it actually ran in a very well chosen 16 colours and worked on any old VGA card thanks to the way it only updated parts of the screen at a time. It was all really sneaky stuff."

"Looking at the game today, what you see on screen has very little to do with what was in my head," continues McLaughlin. "Chris Hill and I had visions of dystopian futuristic cityscapes like in Blade Runner, with lots of trash, hover cars and atmosphere. Of course, very little of this came across in the end, and I'm now convinced that future civilisations won't be tile and sprite-based."

Syndicate's unusually dark feel was not restricted to its countenance. Long before *Grand Theft Auto*, the populations of *Syndicate*'s isometric stages were populated with bit-part, bitmap victims. Self-appointed moral arbiters may blanche at the suggestion, but engaging in wanton, pixel-based slaughter was one of the game's principle pleasures, and was always designed to be just that. "I wanted to flame them, I wanted to shoot them, I wanted to blow them up," says Cooper of *Syndicate*'s sprites. "I think we didn't quite implement it as well as we could have. I'd liked to have seen bodies flying through the air; I wanted to minigun people and have them pinned to a wall. All those things we so badly wanted to do, but we'd have been adding another year to the project time, or so it felt at the time. Memory constraints were the big problem."

A mighty arsenal

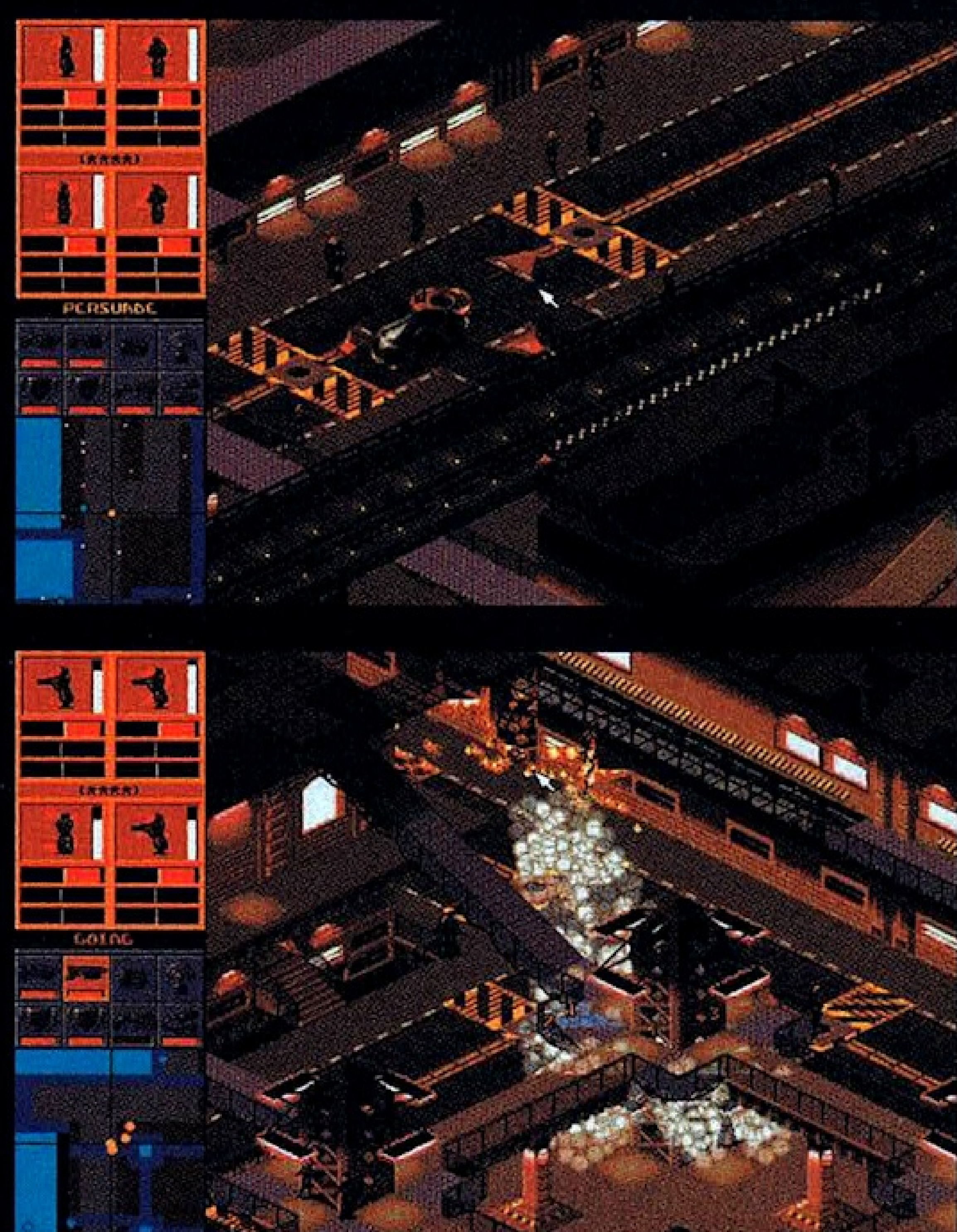
From the explosive gauss gun – originally an EMP weapon, according to Trowers – to what must be the most satisfying implementation of a minigun in videogame history, *Syndicate* was packed with a wishlist of excellent armaments, upgrades and gadgets. "Once we'd developed the gameplay and we'd got the squad-based shooter element, people started coming up with ideas for weapons," recalls Cooper. "The persuadatron came out of nowhere, really – I don't know to this day whose idea it was. I think Peter's still convinced that it's his. It created something interesting: being able to build an army, and was actually quite simple to do. It could be done a lot better… Ah, if we were to do it again now…"

With a management component that drip-fed new gadgetry as players progressed through its many levels, *Syndicate*'s frontend was a perfect complement to its tense, often frantic in-game combat. Strangely, Trowers remembers it with a certain regret. "In hindsight, it was a bit of a pain to implement as it made it quite easy to break the game," he admits. "You could just sit there and wait for the next thing to be ready. The balancing of the mid-levels also became a bit of a nightmare as you couldn't guarantee what the player had access to at the start of the mission. I guess what I'm trying to say is that it was a cool feature, but I'd do it differently nowadays."

Obviously, certain features had to be dropped; working with 80386-based PCs and needing to maximise compatibility, sacrifices were made. Cooper has one piece of trivia that may surprise one-time *Syndicate* devotees: its vehicles were only 'locked' to roads at a late stage in its development. "We had, at one point, allowed players to get into a car and drive anywhere," he reveals. "The reason I took it out is because it didn't look very good – we didn't have enough memory to store the eight different directions for each vehicle and had to reduce them to four. And when playing multiplayer, what was to stop players from simply running over the other agents? We couldn't come up with anything that solved that. It was quite late on in the alpha when I took it out."

However, the biggest disappointment for the *Syndicate* team was the enforced removal of its multiplayer mode during the QA process. "EA couldn't get the network game working on their system, so we had to drop it," laments Trowers. "This was a major blow in my opinion as the multiplayer game was so strong and not many people got to experience it that way. It was how we used to play it, and it was the way it was designed to be played. Snipers behind buildings, carjackings and

"I had visions of dystopian futuristic cityscapes like in Blade Runner, with lots of trash, hover cars and atmosphere. Of course, very little of this came across"



The gauss gun, along with the minigun, is undoubtedly one of the most visually and aurally arresting weapons in shooter history





Long before the *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Syndicate* allowed players the luxury of cutting loose and enjoying the cathartic pleasure of a noisy, amoral city rampage with automatic weapons

drive-by shootings take on a whole new dimension when it's your mate you've just ambushed."

Although later reinstated for the *American Revolt* mission pack, the loss of out-of-the-box network play was a huge shame. Might Bullfrog be regarded, with id, as a pioneer of network gaming were it to have been fixed in time? Who can say? Listening to Trowers, though, it's clear that the published version of *Syndicate* lost a killer feature. "People who would normally leave at six on the dot would hang around for hours to play the game," he explains. "If you weren't on your toes at lunchtime, the game would fill up and you'd be left out. I'm not sure how much of this is rosetinted specs, but I'm pretty sure, even at the time, we knew we had a classic on our hands."

The leader

"It was Sean's first crack at leading a team, and he really did everything he could to make it work," says McLaughlin. "In all honesty I think it's one of the most fun titles I've worked on. It's certainly the one I remember playing at lunchtimes, after work and at home even when I didn't have to."

Syndicate shipped to the sound of critical approbation and a healthy rustling of cash changing hands. Closing our interview, we ask: how does Cooper feel about it now? Does he have any particular regrets?

"Looking back now, it's a bit of a masterpiece in some ways," he replies. "It was one of the highlights of my life working with Glenn, with Alex and with Peter. Looking back on the working relationships we had, on the team, that was the big thing. My biggest regret is that we didn't put enough destruction into it. I would have really liked to have, you know, fired a rocket launcher at a building and have a hole appear in it. But you just couldn't do it at the time. I wanted to see people flung into the air, people landing on buildings, people landing on cars that screech to a halt, all that kind of behaviour, that kind of world. But we just didn't know how to do it.

"It was my second game, and I'd only just started to get to grips with C at that point. We were there until four in the morning most days, getting in at 11 in the mornings. We were so inexperienced, all of us: a bunch of guys going into so-called work, and it was a *hobby!* Someone was paying us good money to go in and do it!"





Despite obvious confines, *Syndicate* was remarkably freeform: it provided the tools, and let you approach any given mission in the manner that you deemed appropriate. Even subtlety worked

RESET



Examining gaming history from the **Edge**, five years ago this month



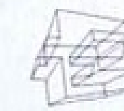
The best - October 1999
Soul Calibur (DC)

Back in the day it was hard to imagine the Dreamcast dying a horrible death after seeing Namco's Soul Calibur, although Sega went on to prove that no matter how good you are at making games, unless you can market them effectively as well, you are dead-meat in this industry.

Sega later went on to proclaim that they were going to take on EA when they moved to fight on the software front alone, and they appear to have failed dismally there too, even though they're still making credible games. They've snapped up some strong European franchises, such as Worms for example, but that's still only likely to earn them more critical acclaim rather than the healthy bank balance that they've been dreaming of ever since we were all 'post-Dreamcast.'

Trickstyle was hardly a mind-blowing classic, but these were the days when every publisher and their dog realised the enourmous market to be tapped into for those that could deliver decent extreme-sports gaming. Five years later, it's clear that nobody has been able to better the Tony Hawk games at all, including Activision, who have used the same core gameplay for numerous other sports, none quite delivering like the Birdman.

Bill saw potential in the Dreamcast, but not because of its marketing model. What interested Microsoft was clearly the online capabilities of Dreamcast, which Microsoft were not going to mistake as being something to worry about later like they did with the PC market.

Gates simply learned from Sega's mistakes and brought us the Xbox. Bless you Bill. 



Best game of the time...



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10

1. Young Peter Molyneux and cohorts go shopping.
2. *TrickStyle*: 'a refreshing slant on the racing game'
3. *Tekken* vitamin drinks…
4. And *Pac-Man* noodles. A scouring of Tokyo's stores had returned some oddities.
5. The *C&C* series is still a 2D top-down wonder…
6. Capcom fights big robots in *Kikaio*, AKA *Tech Romancer*
7. The future of gaming?
8. Yuji Naka thinks so
9. And so does Bill Gates, at least for the moment
10. Ultimately, Sony's evolution would prove more comfortable than Sega's revolution



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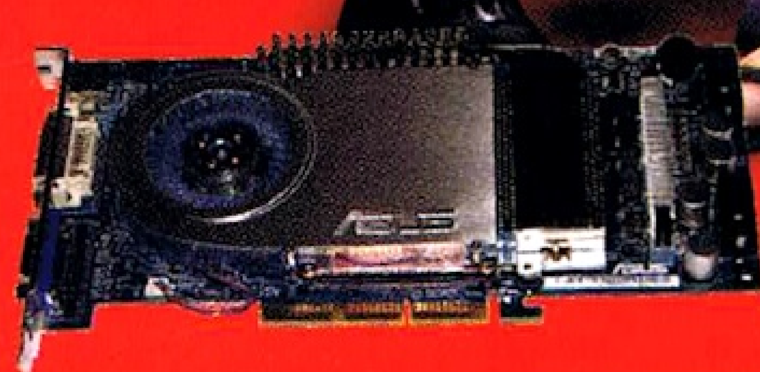
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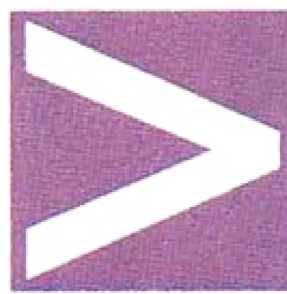


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Where have all the good games gone? And how the hell have game developers forgotten what has worked in the past that didn't require a huge development team, millions of marketing dollars or a movie license to make it out the door?

This is not to boo-hoo the efforts of all developers, as there are always some decent games coming out, some of which have clearly had an immense amount of work that has go into them. What I'm bothered by is that they've put a whole lot of hard work into a game that simply doesn't play as well as a whole bunch of 8-bit games did many years ago.

Take the Commodore 64 for example. Every kid in the '80s who had a thing for video games either had one or wanted one, and people had libraries of hundreds of games. Nobody needed FMV cut-scenes, 32-bit colour or more than one button on their joystick to lose entire evenings to gaming. Was there a fundamentally better mindset back in the day? Were developers more in touch with the gamers they were coding for? Or are the gamers of today just all about visual gratification, an easy path to the victory dias and the next big movie license?
Industry Turncoat

Rose coloured glasses of retrospectiveness? It's a magic item every old-school gamer appears to slide down their forehead onto the bridge of their nose every now and then. Is this not just a case of no longer having the enthusiasm levels of a child?

How have your expectation levels changed, and why have they changed? Oh that's right, the standards were raised across the board and we all came to take amazing graphics, sound and depth for granted.

Yes, there is an undeniable truth that simple concepts work the best, which has had **Edge** thinking - Can the reasons that the true champions of gameplay in the past were so blindingly obvious all be attributed to the fact that no games of the time were truly assaulting our senses with anything that remarkable? You can call it a relative thing, but in raw terms, games of the past were blocky, and required imagination to decipher a lot of the time. There's a reason hardcore gamers of the past were usually 'nerds', and that's because the nerds had the mind required to lose themselves in a bunch of blocky sprites.

But you highlighted the real problem with this call of yours, and that's that you had hundreds of C64 games. Don't try and tell us most of them were good. Of course we all remember the classics, just like we'll probably all remember *Half-Life 2*.

Please also don't tell us that you've forgotten load times that required going for a walk, having your tape drive go out of alignment? We know you've still got those jeweller's screwdrivers somewhere, just in case.

If you don't like our answer, just shut up, buy *Gradius V* and stop wasting time complaining about missing something that's still there. You'll always be old-school style games, just don't expect the rest of the world to want to do so as well. That's the way it works in every entertainment industry.

Exactly who is Sony and Microsoft trying to kid when they say that online gaming is the next big thing? I'm one of the lucky few people with access to a broadband Internet account, so I've had the pleasure of playing my Xbox and PlayStation 2 online. However, given the way online console gaming is structured, it's just not something I'm prepared to do on a long term basis.

Let's put it this way: a game or two, or even a whole console, represents a one-off purchase in my budget. Having to pay recurring yearly and/or monthly fees for the privilege of playing my PlayStation 2 or Xbox online, however, counts against my ongoing household budget, together with other costs like electricity, water, mortgage repayments and so on. I can justify paying $50 or thereabouts per month for broadband Internet, but having to add an additional fee for something as (let's face it) trivial as playing the occasional game online when I can do it quite freely through my PC is an undertaking I'm not prepared to take.
Sharaz Jek

This is something all game publishers would've accounted for when gauging the viability of online console gaming – and the revenue potential from subscription services are such that they'd want to make it a reality. Games alone may not be enough to open up the consumers' wallets, which is why a lot of the future plans from Sony and Microsoft involve some kind of online multimedia functionality. Things will get very interesting when the PSP and Nintendo DS come around,

It's becoming quite ridiculous, this competition between Sony and Microsoft. One touts the hardware, the other touts its userbase and it all turns into a pointless contest to see who has the bigger genitals.

The latest claims I've heard take the cake – that *Forza Motorsports* is Microsoft's *Gran Turismo* killer; and that *Killzone* is Sony's *Halo* killer. Let's look to Forza first, shall we? Now look, *Forza* isn't going to kill anything. It's not going to matter if it features the most rivetting physics and handling on this blessed earth or real-life cars with full damage modelling – the only way *Forza* is going to kill anything is if it's called *Gran Turismo 5*. The same could be said of *Killzone* too, to be honest. The screens and online trailers reminiscent of *Half-Life* and *Halo* and there are some things you'd genuinely think "That's the PlayStation 2? Bloody hell!", but there's just too much of that "me too!" look about it.
Max Shrek

Or how about you just wait until the games come out before you make any more rash comments? You're already a step ahead of the curve if you can see past the marketing and hype, so all that's left to do is let the games do the talking.

There's something I've just become aware of in my own gaming taste: namely, that simple games are often the most fun, and that 'cinematic' storylines and interminable cut-scenes are, all too often, sapping the essence of gaming.

Those stories rarely hold much intrinsic value in

> How come we find ourselves in such a sad state of affairs, where so few shmups ever see a western release, and even within Japan there are few developers pursuing the genre?

Samuel Baker cites *Espgaluda* as being deserving of his time and money in place of *Driver 3*, but does the market exist for 2D shooters nowadays?



any case. Let's face it, Umbrella was incorporated for no reason other than to plonk zombies in front of the player, to then be shot. And *Metal Gear Solid*'s premise of foiling the use of a mobile nuclear missile platform is certainly dramatic, but all that's really asked of the player is to avoid being spotted, and then to observe the rest passively.

Driver 3 is the antithesis of progression in videogames. Sacrificing a playable – or even serviceable – game engine in favour of the trappings and trinkets of the *GTA* genre is cynical in the extreme, and displays a total lack of love or respect for all that's good and fun about gaming.

But above all, it's *Espgaluda* that has won both my respect and my hard-earned cash this month. Why? Because it's thrilling where most games are tedious, pure where others are complicated and displays clarity of purpose where others fumble with their lip-syncing and mo-cap. It's telling that, on Cave's own Japanese bulletin boards, when the question of the game's ease (relative to other shmups) is raised, Cave's response is that they considered very carefully just how they could make the shooter genre as inclusive and as fun as possible. The complexity is there, within the delicate structure of the apparently simple mechanic. Those who go looking for it will be amply rewarded; those who simply seek a thrill shall not be disappointed.

So how come we find ourselves in such a sad state of affairs, where so few shmups ever see a western release, and even within Japan there are precious few developers still pursuing the genre? For this, I have no answer.

Samuel Baker

Perhaps the arrival of *Gradius V* in might turn things around a little. On the other hand, it could simply be dismissed as a retro-flavoured curio, fail to even touch the PS2 top 20 and represent just another nail in the 2D shooter coffin.

As an employee of a games publisher, I'm curious as to whether or not the **Edge** team could define what matters to them when it comes to reviewing games, as well as assessing early code for potential?

The magazine has a reputation for being completely honest, but from an industry perspective, we sometimes feel it's brutal rather than simply a case of 'pulling no punches.'

So do we brace ourselves for the worst?

PR Bunny

The first thing to keep in mind is that as industry veterans, we see most everything that comes out, and for that reason we get a clear view of the whole spectrum of gaming. Most gaming journalists are just as rabidly excitable about getting their hands on a new game as a punter off the street. Then when you see another twenty games released that year that work on the same principles, you start to realise how few of the publishers/developers took any sort of risk on their own project. Understandable considering the costs of embarking on such projects, but it's a course of action either that suggest either a lack of ideas, or spine.

What **Edge** is looking for are games that work as pure entertainment without being entirely derivative. A clone can be a great game, but **Edge** is more interested in the games that pioneer new experiences, whether they be through technological breakthroughs, or simply brilliant design that results in something more involving and emotionally provocative than the norm.

If you want an example, consider PC RTS games. Look at *Kohan II*, *Warcraft III*, *Battle for Middle-Earth* and *War of the Ring*. Do they all look the same at a glance? Do you do the same basic things in all of them?

Edge is not unreasonable, we simply refuse to be excited by the prospect of something we've essentially already seen.

I and a few of the other guys in the office are curious as to what you folk think of the Nokia N-Gage, and mobile phone gaming in general?

Is it presently worthwhile, is it going to get better, is it something we should stop paying attention to.

Landline Lover

That's one that's been debated amongst the **Edge** staff a couple of times, although there's one thing that we, as gaming journalists who have access to all systems and new releases have trouble looking past, and that's this - Unless the quality of the games warrants play in the first place, why should we want to buy an extremely expensive mobile phone for the chance to play a rather limited range of games. This is how **Edge** feels about all features in mobile phones too. What real benefit is it to have a built-in camera that makes the average webcam look like a precision imaging tool? It's a gimick.

That's not to say that Nokia can't rectify this situation or that mobile phones can't become a viable gaming platform (for real gamers) in the future. Until they do though, we'll stay excited about things like PSP and DS instead.

The Xbox has been the first console to have a built-in hard drive, and now it's in question as to whether or not Microsoft will include this in their next machine.

Maybe my concerns are just a result of being spoilt with one and not wanting to do without, but do you think Microsoft can get away with taking this element away from the Xbox formula?

Storage Slut

Perhaps the question should be if they can get away with including it again. A whole mess of Xbox owners have gone out and replaced their existing HD with a larger one, using a chip to allow them to copy DVD and games right onto their machine.

By taking away the hard drive from the next machine, Microsoft may eliminate a lot of their piracy headaches, and that's not something they can be blamed for prioritising.

If enough consumers make enough noise, then **Edge** imagines MS will weigh that up before making their final decision. Keep shouting.



By taking away the hard drive from the next machine, Microsoft may eliminate a lot of their piracy headaches, and that's not something they can be blamed for prioritising.

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